



# Martha

Orlan Orphans, Book 13



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KIRSTEN  
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# Martha

Orlan Orphans Book 13

Kirsten Osbourne

Unlimited Dreams

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## Chapter 1

Edna Petunia Sanders beamed at her adopted daughters as they sang proudly in church. Years after she and her husband had taken the fifteen orphans into their home, she was still amazed at how unique and special each one was. In the rows ahead of and behind her sat the daughters who'd already married, along with their families. The twins, Ruby and Opal, were the oldest. Now, each woman had not only a husband and children, but also her own set of twins! Edna Petunia could barely keep track of all of her daughters, let alone their bountiful offspring.

Evelyn, who'd married a handsome rancher, obtaining a spirited stepson in the process, was almost the same age as the twins. Next came Gertrude, Betsy, and Hope. Each had found her true love, and now they sat near Edna Petunia, rocking fussy babies and calming excited children.

Edna Petunia took note of Penny's boys in particular. Her husband, Tom, was the seventh son of a seventh son, and Tom swore that Penny would bear him seven boys as well. They were well on their way to making that prophecy come true, and Penny seemed like she had her hands full as she quieted the boys. One had his leg out as if he were going to climb on top of the pew, but Penny picked him up before he could get very far.

In addition to the children Penny had birthed, she and Tom had also adopted several orphaned boys, who lived on their massive property outside of Bagley. The older boys stood next to the younger ones, looking handsome and grown-up in their starched white shirts and brown trousers. The McClains tried to make it to Nowhere for church at least once a month, but it was a bit of a drive for them.

At the front of the church, Sarah Jane watched her husband proudly. Micah Barton was the pastor of Nowhere's only church, and in the short time he'd been in town, he had developed a wonderful community that Edna Petunia loved being a part of. Though Edna Petunia had scolded him on more than one occasion for performing marriage ceremonies for one of her overly excited orphans, she had to admit that he was a wonderful husband and father.

Behind Edna Petunia were Minnie, Alice, and Dorothy, sitting with their husbands and children. When they'd first taken the orphans in, Edna Petunia had prayed that there would be enough young men in Nowhere to marry all of her orphans. She'd later realized that she needn't have worried. Her daughters seemed to attract men in droves!

Sitting beside her and her husband, Cletus, were the girls who still lived in their spacious Nowhere home. Theresa, Hattie, and Katie sang sweetly, their melodies ringing out through the small but tidy church. Cletus often told Katie she had the voice of an angel. Edna Petunia's gaze continued down to the end of the row. Martha, the other daughter who still lived in the Sanders' house, stared solemnly ahead, her lips barely moving.

Edna Petunia frowned. No matter what she or Cletus did, they could not seem to get through to Martha. She was polite and respectful and always did her chores. Her behavior wasn't an issue. The problem was that she was *too* serious. She was a year older than Theresa, Hattie, and Katie—the same age as Dorothy. But unlike Dorothy, who was outgoing and bubbly, Martha was reserved, shy. Edna Petunia thought she might never marry.

The thought made her sad. Edna Petunia saw how much joy her daughters' families brought them. She wanted the same opportunities for Martha. All she knew about Martha's past she had learned from Cassie Hayes, the matron who had brought all the girls to live in Nowhere after the orphanage in New York had sent them away. Cassie had told Edna Petunia and Cletus that Martha's background was the most mysterious of all.

One day, a small girl had been found sitting in the street in front of the orphanage. While other nearby children played, laughed, or skipped, this little girl sat quietly, hugging her knees to her chest. The women who had run the orphanage had taken her in, washed the dirt off her face, and given her clean clothes to wear. But every time they touched her, Martha would flinch.

All these years later, Martha's behavior hadn't changed much. Though Edna Petunia's girls were a close and loving bunch, Martha always shied away from hugs and other displays of affection.

Edna Petunia sighed. Even if there was another eligible bachelor in Nowhere—and there wasn't, as far as she could tell—Martha would probably run away from him the first time he tried to touch her. Edna Petunia didn't understand why Martha was still so skittish and solitary. She and Cletus had tried everything that they knew how to do. Now, her husband took her hand and squeezed it. Edna Petunia felt a ripple of delight buzz through her body. After years of marriage, Cletus Sanders could still make her blush.

From the edge of their row, Martha Sanders looked down at her

feet. She could tell that her adoptive mother was staring at her, and her cheeks felt hot with embarrassment. Martha didn't like attention, and that was all her parents seemed to want to give. She knew she wasn't a strong singer like Katie or confident like Sarah Jane. She wasn't as sweet as Dorothy or as honest as Hope. Compared with her sisters, she felt plain and boring. Sometimes she thought she didn't deserve to belong to the Sanders family, where everyone was kind, loving, and generous. Compared to her sisters and her parents, Martha felt like she didn't have anything to offer.

Martha mouthed the words to the song. She wasn't confident enough to sing out loudly, but she didn't want anyone to think she wasn't paying attention. She was offering praise in the only way she knew how—quietly. Her eyes drifted to the opposite side of the church, where Mary Sibley batted her eyelashes dramatically as she sang. Martha could hear Mary's warbling so clearly she'd have thought she was standing right next to her. Martha fought the urge to shake her head. She liked almost everyone in the town of Nowhere, but Mary was an exception. The only daughter of a banker and his wife, Mary had been spoiled all her life and acted as if she were better than everyone else.

Martha turned her head back toward Micah. She knew she shouldn't focus on the negative. Overall, she had a very good life in Nowhere. Although she didn't fit in, her living situation was all she had ever dreamed of—she lived in a large, rambling house with a huge, loving family. Her parents were good and treated her with dignity and respect. Her sisters were kind, thoughtful, and funny. As a young girl, Martha had never thought a life like this would be possible.

The song came to a close, and everyone shut their hymn books. Micah said a few more words, then dismissed the parishioners. The people of Nowhere sauntered through the church, greeting each other, hugging, and laughing. They exited through the doors and went out onto the lawn, where they continued to talk.

Martha's sister Penny was one of the last to come out of the church. She carried two of her sons, one in each arm, and another, Robby, had clenched his arms around her leg. She moved slowly, waiting patiently for Robby to walk along with her.

"Do you need some help?" Martha asked.

"Aunt Martha!" Robby cried. He let go of his mother's legs and flew over to Martha.

Martha chuckled and picked him up. "Hello, Robby." She was so much more comfortable holding a child than she was conversing with an adult.

"Thank you," Penny said gratefully.

Edna Petunia walked over to her daughters. “Penny, you look awful!”

Martha’s jaw dropped. She still hadn’t gotten used to how forthright Edna Petunia could be at times.

But Penny simply laughed. “I have four sons and twelve orphans. I’m exhausted! So no, I don’t look my best. But Tom doesn’t mind.”

“What don’t I mind?” Tom sidled up to Penny, slipping an arm around her. Tom was tall, handsome, and broad-shouldered. Martha wondered if all of his brothers looked just like him.

“I was explaining to Edna Petunia that we have our hands full as far as children are concerned, and that my appearance isn’t my top priority.” Penny smiled at her husband.

Tom smiled back at her, kissing her right on the lips. Martha looked down, embarrassed. “As far as I can tell, your job is to raise our boys—both the ones you gave birth to and the ones we’ve taken in as our own—and you’re doing an amazing job at that.” Tom paused, thinking for a moment. “I do wish you had more help around the house. I’m out on the ranch all day with my men, and there’s no one to assist you with your household duties. Too bad we don’t have any daughters.”

“Maybe you should borrow one of our daughters!” Edna Petunia joked.

Cletus Sanders strode over and pinched Edna Petunia’s bottom. She giggled like a schoolgirl. “What’s all this about borrowing one of our girls? They’re not for sale or rent!”

Tom wore a funny expression on his face. “I know you intended it as a joke, Edna Petunia, but that’s not a bad idea.”

“What idea?” Cletus sounded grumpy.

“Maybe one of your sisters could help out around the house. They could help you with the children and cooking, cleaning, laundry. I know most of the girls are already out of the house with their own families, but one of the younger girls. Like Martha!” Tom continued.

Everyone turned to stare at Martha. She felt the tips of her ears turn red.

Penny turned to look at Tom. “We can’t ask Martha to do that. We live so far away. She’d spend half the day traveling to and from our house.”

Tom had an answer ready. “She can live with us! We have two empty cabins right now. One’s for the new hired hand starting tomorrow, and the other can be for Martha.” Tom and Penny’s property was so large that it had a series of cabins on the grounds. Orphans that Tom and Penny had adopted typically stayed there, but some of them moved away once they were old enough to strike out on their own.

Martha cleared her throat. "I would be happy to help." She actually liked the idea of being away from the big boisterous family she was a part of for a little while. No one would be watching her and wondering what was wrong with her.

"Are you sure?" Penny's expression looked hopeful.

Martha nodded. "Of course. You have enough to worry about. Let me help take a few things off your mind."

"Sounds like a fine idea to me." Cletus looked around at his daughters, wife, and son-in-law. "Not that anyone asked me!"

They all broke into laughter. Martha wondered what it would be like to live in one of the cabins. It would be the first time in her entire life she'd ever lived on her own. She had her own room in the Sanders' house, but this seemed like it would be different.

It was new and scary, but it was also a little exciting.



THE DAY WAS bright and dry as the horses clipped along toward the McClain Ranch. Katie, Hattie, and Theresa had helped her pack a trunk that contained all of her clothes and belongings. Now, Cletus drove the wagon out of Nowhere toward Bagley.

Each time she visited, Martha was struck by how large and beautiful Penny and Tom's home was. The cabins lined the front of the property in neat, orderly rows. Tom rode out on horseback to greet them.

Cletus parked the wagon, and Martha rushed to climb down, not wanting anyone to come to her aid, for that would mean they had to touch her.

"Good morning!" Tom declared.

Martha found herself smiling. Tom was so kind and cheerful, it made her forget her nervousness and apprehension about living in a new place.

"You'll be in Cabin Five, right over here." Tom gestured toward one of the cabins that was right next to another one. "The new man, Andrew Ford, will be in the cabin over there. He shouldn't trouble you at all. He'll be up early to begin his work. He'll take his meals in the bunkhouse, so you won't see him in the evening either. But please let me know if it bothers you at all to be situated so close to him." Tom wore a look of genuine concern on his face.

"Thank you, Tom." Martha nodded to show her understanding. She appreciated his consideration. He was a good man, and Penny was lucky to have him as her husband and the father of her children.

"I'll leave you to get settled now. I have some work to do. If you need anything, Penny's in the main house. She told me to tell you not



to worry about lunch today; take some time to get your things in order and go over to the house once you're ready." Tom looked around the small cabin. "I reckon that's about all there is to say. Is there anything else you need before I get back to work?"

Martha considered it but couldn't think of a single thing. "No. Thanks again."

Tom nodded and smiled at Cletus. "Good to see you, sir."

Cletus grinned and clapped Tom on the back. "You as well, son. Take care of our girl now, you hear?"

"Of course, sir." Tom's tone was solemn as he looked Cletus straight in the eye.

"See you later, Martha." Tom waved and exited the cabin.

Cletus eyed the trunk he'd dragged into the room. "Would you like some help unpacking?"

Martha shook her head quickly. "No, thank you."

"At least let me stay and provide some company while you put your things away," Cletus offered.

"No, you don't need to do that." Martha looked at the floor. She knew Cletus was only trying to help, but he was making her uncomfortable by staying. She hated asking anyone else for assistance. She could handle unpacking.

"Nonsense. I want to. Where should I leave this for you?" Cletus pointed at the bulky trunk.

Martha swallowed. "I think you should leave, Cletus. I'll be fine here. The trunk is fine where it is."

Cletus opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it and frowned. "Well, if you insist. Martha, you know you can always come back, right?"

"What do you mean?" Martha wasn't sure what Cletus was hinting at.

"If things don't work out here. You always have a home with us. You know that, right?" Cletus continued.

Martha blushed, surprised and grateful. "Thank you, Cletus."

Cletus pulled Martha close for a hug. "We'll miss you, Martha. Come back and have dinner with us any time."

Martha felt stiff in Cletus's embrace. She knew that he only wanted her to be happy, but she'd always been uncomfortable with people touching her in any way. She tried to hug him back, but her moves felt tense and unsure. "Thank you, Cletus."

Cletus stood back, brushing his hands against his pants to get the dust off. "Anything else you need, Martha? You say the word."

Again, Martha shook her head. "You should get going. You'll be late for work."

Cletus held an office on Main Street as the town judge, and he

worked long hours each day, ensuring safety and justice for the people of Nowhere. He nodded. "See you in church, then."

"Goodbye, Cletus." Martha watched as Cletus walked outside of the cabin. A few moments later, she heard the crack of the reins and imagined the wagon setting off for town. Martha looked around the small cabin and hugged her arms to her chest. She couldn't believe that the entire cabin was hers.

She stood still for a moment, listening to the sounds that surrounded her. Outside, birds and crickets chirped. Inside, everything was calm. In the corner sat a narrow bed with a homemade quilt perched on top. Next to it was a small night stand along with a wash basin and a sink. In the opposite corner of the room was a large armoire. Martha tugged on the handle, and it swung open with a small creak.

She breathed in the scent of cedar and walked over to the trunk, opening it. She took out a few of the clothes she'd packed toward the top of the trunk. She unfolded blouses and shook them out before hanging them in the armoire.

With each item of clothing that she put away, Martha felt more secure and settled in her new home. While she still felt strange being away from her adoptive parents, she was sure this new arrangement would be wonderful. She would get to spend more time with her nephews. She could tell Penny needed some help. She had looked drained the last time Martha had seen her in church, not at all her usual cheerful, bubbly self.

As Martha came to the bottom of the trunk, she pulled out a small rag doll. She gazed at it lovingly. Suddenly, the door to the cabin burst open, and a tall man sprang into the room, carrying two overstuffed bags.

Martha shrieked, dropped the doll, and took fearful step backward.

The man was tall and strapping. Martha felt her breath catch in the back of her throat. What was he doing barging in unannounced to her cabin?

The stranger looked at her curiously, then back outside, then back at her. "What are you doing here? This is my cabin."

At the same time, Martha said, "This is my cabin."

The man pulled a folded piece of paper from his pants pocket. "It says right here, I'll be in Cabin—oh. Oh dear."

"What is it?" Martha asked, curious despite herself.

The man's face dropped as he looked around the room, realizing what he'd done. "I'm very sorry, ma'am. I owe you a sincere apology. It says here I'll be in Cabin Six, but this seems to be Cabin Five. I'm good with letters but sometimes numbers can be confounding."

Martha suppressed a bubble of laughter she felt rising up inside of

her. Whoever this man was, he needed to get out of the cabin quickly. But she also felt strangely at ease with him. He was funny, and she wanted to know more about him. She took a deep breath. "It's all right. I'm Martha. Penny's sister."

A look of recognition flitted across the stranger's face. "Oh my! Please, let me start that again."

To Martha's surprise and amusement, the man went outside the cabin, set down his bags on the small porch, and reentered the room. He offered a hand. "Andrew Ford. Pleasure to meet you, please excuse my dreadful manners, and kindly don't tell my mother about this. She'd be mortified."

Again, Martha felt the urge to laugh. "It's nice to meet you, too." As he vigorously shook her hand, she felt a strange thrill in her stomach she'd never experienced before.

Andrew continued. "I'm here to work as a hired man for Tom McClain. He mentioned his wife was one of fifteen girls. Is that right?"

Martha nodded. "Our parents adopted all of us at the same time."

"And I suppose you're all spoken for?" Andrew asked.

Martha felt her ears and cheeks flush. She looked down at the floor, spying the forgotten doll. "No. Many of us have married, but a few of us are single."

"Lucky for me then." Andrew flashed her a grin, then seemed to recall his location. "Anyway, I should leave you alone. My sincerest of apologies for intruding, and I'll apologize to Penny and Tom as well. I hope I didn't frighten you."

Martha shook her head. Though she'd been scared, she didn't want to admit it.

Andrew's gaze fell onto the doll on the floor. "Oh, I'm sorry. I must have made you drop this." He bent down to pick it up and handed it to Martha. As his hand brushed against hers, she felt the same thrill as she had moments before. She pulled her hand back, stung, and Andrew looked at her with an expression of concern. "Are you all right?"

Martha looked away, clutching the doll. She was embarrassed that he was seeing her with such a childish toy, but he couldn't possibly understand what it meant to her. "I'm fine. But you should be going."

"Right." Andrew shoved his hands into his pockets. "Well, again, I'm terribly sorry to trouble you. I hope I'll see you around." He turned around and walked out of the cabin.

Martha sat down on the bed, shaking from the surprise of her unexpected visitor. Her heart pounded loudly in her chest, and she tried to take a few deep breaths to calm herself. How could this unfamiliar man produce such strong feelings in her?

## Chapter 2

Martha settled into her new life on the ranch nicely. She rose around dawn to prepare breakfast for Tom and Penny's family, including their adopted orphans. She was thankful there was a bunkhouse for the men who worked the ranch.

Depending on the day, there were anywhere from five to ten men, including Andrew Ford, who worked on the land. Martha rarely saw them. She took her meals with Tom and Penny's children and some of the orphans. She loved spending time with her nephews and getting to know them better. She certainly felt an affinity for all the boys her sister had adopted.

On Sundays when they went to Nowhere, the entire group would pile into several wagons and set off for church services. Martha loved those Sundays because she got to see all of her sisters and Edna Petunia and Cletus. She would have never admitted it out loud, but as much as she enjoyed her new arrangement, she missed her adoptive parents and their constant banter.

As Tom had predicted, Martha barely saw Andrew Ford, except for one evening when he joined the family for dinner. Martha was so nervous that she barely said a word for the entire dinner, although Andrew complimented her cooking several times. Apart from that, she barely saw the man despite the fact that their cabins were right next to one another. But one day, he was outside shining a pair of shoes as she walked out to start breakfast.

"Morning!" Andrew flashed a wide grin.

Martha wanted to smile back at him but looked at his shoes instead. "I thought you'd be at work by now."

"I have the day off. Tom's a fair man." Andrew gestured to Martha's outfit. "You look lovely this morning."

Martha frowned. "I don't know about that."

"Then take my word for it. You do," Andrew said easily.

Martha blushed. She wondered if he was flirting with her. She didn't know much about such matters but a small part of her hoped that he was. She felt excited simply to be talking to him.

"You know," Andrew continued. "One of these days you're going

to have to tell me a little more about yourself. You're so mysterious!"

Martha shook her head violently. "There's nothing to tell."

Andrew laughed. "I'm sure there's plenty to tell. Like how you came to end up in Texas. You don't sound like you're from Texas."

Martha bit her lip. "I need to go start breakfast."

Andrew smiled. "Surely they can spare you for a few minutes."

"I was placed in an orphanage when I was very small." Martha spoke quietly and looked at the ground. "When I was thirteen, the church that ran the orphanage sent us to Texas on a bus. They didn't feel it was right to have girls and boys living under the same roof. But something fell through when we got here. We didn't have a place to live as we thought we would."

Andrew let out a low whistle. "You traveled all the way from New York to Texas on a bus? I'm sure that's a story in its own right."

"I barely remember it." Martha waved a hand. She looked nervously at the main house even though she knew it would be some time before anyone else was awake. She liked Andrew, but she hated talking about herself. There were certain things that had to remain a secret, and it was hard when people poked and prodded, expecting answers.

"Nevertheless, I'd love to treat you to dinner sometime and hear more about it, Miss Martha." Andrew looked her directly in the eyes, and Martha fidgeted and looked down. She felt like he was looking right into her soul.

Martha hastily waved goodbye. "I need to go now." She practically raced to the main house.

Andrew switched the shoe he was shining for its twin. He shook his head and laughed. Martha was an enigma. A very lovely enigma, but an enigma nonetheless. He wondered what she was hiding. She seemed so sweet, but so sad. He hoped he could find a way to lessen her burden.

Martha rushed into the kitchen. Penny laughed when she saw Martha's face. "Martha, you're as red as a turnip. What's gotten into you?"

Martha ignored Penny's question. "What should I start with today?"

Penny couldn't hide a gleeful smile. "Have you been talking to Andrew Ford?"

Martha was horrified. How did Penny possibly know about her private thoughts and feelings about Andrew? "No, that's not it," she began, but she couldn't lie to her sister. "Yes. I was talking to him. But only very briefly."

Penny poured grease onto a large griddle. "He's quite a handsome man."

Martha tried frantically to think of another topic of conversation. She retrieved a basket of eggs from the counter and set them near the stovetop. She found a small bowl and began to crack several eggs, whipping them with a fork in preparation for the skillet. "What are we going to make for dinner tonight?"

Penny acted like she hadn't heard Martha. "You know, as much as you're thinking about him, he's thinking about you, too."

"What does that mean?" Martha asked, confused.

"He asked Tom and me to help him figure out how to impress you. Even told us he thinks you're beautiful. I believe his exact words were, 'She's the marrying type.'"

"He did?" The hopeful words flew out of Martha's mouth before she realized what she was saying.

A knowing smile spread across Penny's face. "I knew it! You *do* like him!"

Martha felt immediately uneasy. She didn't want to be in the kitchen with Penny anymore. She wanted to be all alone, where no one could hurt her or make fun of her. "I didn't say that," she said weakly.

Penny saw that Martha was uncomfortable and paused from her breakfast preparations. "Martha, what's wrong?"

Martha looked down. "I don't . . . I don't feel very well."

"Why don't you sit down and rest?" Penny suggested.

"No, I'll be fine. Can we change the subject though?" Martha asked.

"I only wanted to bring it up because I thought it might make you feel better. You've seemed a little lonely since coming here. I know we haven't always been the closest of sisters, but I want you to enjoy living here. You're a great help to me and my whole family, Martha." Penny's eyes shined with unfallen tears.

Martha knew Penny genuinely cared for her. Part of her wanted to give Penny a hug or thank her for her kind words. But something stopped her from saying or doing anything. "Can we get back to making breakfast?"

Penny nodded. "Of course."

Martha busied herself, pouring the eggs into the skillet and scrambling them. Penny cooked sausages right next to her, and together they prepared for the pack of boys, from toddlers to teenagers, who would soon be eating breakfast at the table.

Martha took deep breaths to steady herself, focusing entirely on preparing the food and trying to put all thoughts of Andrew Ford out of her mind. All she knew was that she didn't want to talk to Penny about her feelings.

As the minutes pressed on, Martha found her thoughts returning to

the young ranch hand. She imagined him talking to Penny and Tom and confiding his feelings for her. As she scooped scrambled eggs from the skillet onto the plates of Penny's children and orphans, she wondered exactly what his intentions were.

She didn't want to get her hopes up, but Penny had said that he had mentioned marriage. That seemed absurd to Martha. She assumed she would never marry. Compared to her sisters and their engaging personalities, she had never thought she'd be lucky enough to find a spouse.

"Aunt Martha?" John, one of the older orphans, held out his plate expectantly.

Martha blushed as she realized she had been caught daydreaming, paused in front of John with an empty ladle. She hastily scooped the ladle back into the skillet and distributed some eggs onto John's plate. "I'm sorry, John."

"Thank you, Aunt Martha!" John said cheerily. He hopped over to the breakfast table, where he joined the other orphans and Tom and Penny's children.

Martha sighed. She knew she needed to get herself together. Otherwise, she wasn't going to be much help to anyone at all.

## Chapter 3

“*A*ndrew Ford, I presume?” An older man’s gravelly voice interrupted Andrew’s thoughts as he strode out of church services into the bright, hot Nowhere day.

Andrew turned around, pleasantly surprised that someone knew his name. He was new in town, and hadn’t become acquainted with many townspeople, except for the ones who also worked on the McClain ranch.

“Gerald Sibley. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The old man offered his hand, and Andrew shook it heartily. Gerald Sibley had gray hair and a kind smile.

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Sibley.” Andrew nodded respectfully at the two women standing behind Gerald as they all exited the small church structure.

The small group found a space in the field outside of the church to continue talking. “This is my wife, Veronica, and our daughter, Mary.”

“How do you do?” Andrew remarked politely. Veronica and Mary greeted him warmly, and Mary gave him a shy, soft smile.

“I run the bank in Nowhere,” Gerald explained. “I understand you’re working for Tom McClain.”

“That’s right.” Andrew looked around for the McClain family and smiled as he saw them speaking to an elderly couple. Andrew knew they must be Edna Petunia and Cletus, the colorful Nowhere citizens who had adopted a brood full of orphans despite their advanced age. Tom had told him many funny stories about the pair, and he looked forward to meeting them.

“Would you like to take a walk? I’d like to show you some of the property that surrounds our church,” Gerald suggested.

Andrew frowned. It seemed like a big, open field to him. He wasn’t sure what Gerald was getting at, but he felt rude not to oblige. “Of course, sir.”

Gerald smiled at his family and took Andrew’s elbow as they distanced themselves from the rest of the church crowd. “As you’ve probably guessed, the land around our church isn’t my primary reason for talking with you, son.”



Andrew wondered what Gerald wanted from him. "What exactly is your reason for talking with me?"

Gerald sighed. "My daughter, Mary, is eighteen years old this year. She's in excellent health, kind and cheerful, and has all the skills to run a household well. But you see, we don't get many single young men, such as yourself, around Nowhere."

Andrew immediately understood why Gerald wanted to talk to him. "You'd like me to court your daughter."

Gerald looked surprised. "I wasn't going to be so presumptuous, but yes. I've heard good things from Tom and the others who work on his ranch. You're a good man, with common decency, integrity, and intellect. You come from a good family. It seems to me like you'd be an ideal match for my girl."

Andrew paused, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "I'm flattered, sir. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought a lot about marriage in these past few weeks. But I don't know if I'm ready to make such a large commitment. I'd have to get to know a woman first before proposing marriage."

To Andrew's surprise, Gerald laughed. "Of course, son! I'm not trying to rush you into marriage this afternoon. I simply wanted to let you know of my daughter's eligibility. I believe that if you gave her a chance, she'd prove to you that she'd be an excellent wife."

"I'm sure you're right, sir. She's a lovely young woman," Andrew said politely. He watched Mary from a distance. She wore pretty white gloves on her hands and a peach-colored dress. Mary seemed pretty and sweet, but there was another woman who had been on Andrew's mind since the day he'd moved in. And she wasn't giving him the time of day.

Andrew's eyes found their way to Martha, who held one of her young nephews in her arms and spoke with him quietly as her family held an animated discussion nearby. Martha was different from the others. She was quieter, and it seemed she was always thinking. Andrew felt sure there was much more to her personality than she wasn't comfortable sharing with anyone.

He longed to get close to her once again, to find out what she was hiding and what she was afraid of. He wanted to be her sworn protector, the man who was privileged to be her husband, starting a family of their own, maybe one that could rival Tom and Penny's brood.

But each time he approached her, Martha had either avoided his questions or excused herself. He had asked Tom and Penny for help, but all they would say was that Martha was a private person and most often kept to herself. He wanted to take her out on a proper date, but she wouldn't even lend herself to a proper conversation.

“Son? Are you all right?” Gerald’s voice broke through Andrew’s thoughts.

“Please excuse me, sir. I was thinking about what a fine young woman your daughter is,” Andrew said smoothly. “I’m sure her upbringing has been impeccable.”

Gerald looked flattered. “Thank you, Andrew. I won’t take any more of your time. I only wanted to introduce myself and present the idea to you. Something to think about.”

Andrew and Gerald shook hands again, then Gerald returned to his family. Andrew watched as Gerald helped his wife and daughter step into a wagon.

Andrew joined Tom and Penny.

“What was that about?” Penny asked sharply, her eyes following the Sibley family.

“Gerald Sibley introduced himself to me and told me his daughter is available for marriage.” Andrew didn’t see a reason to hide this fact from the McClains.

Penny’s expression narrowed. “I thought you were interested in someone else.” Penny kept her voice lowered so the rest of the Sanders family, including Martha, couldn’t hear her.

Tom also spoke quietly. “Penny, don’t give Andrew a hard time. I’m sure he was only being polite.”

“That’s right. And while I do have eyes for a certain someone, that person doesn’t seem a bit interested in me,” Andrew clarified, his eyes lingering on Martha as she played with her young nephew nearby.

“Just give her some time,” Penny urged.

“Give who some time?” Theresa asked, coming up to her sister and brother-in-law. “Hi, Andrew!”

“Hello,” Andrew said pleasantly. He recognized the girl as one of Penny and Martha’s sisters, but he had no idea which one. He wondered how anyone was able to keep track of them.

“What were you talking about?” Theresa persisted.

“I’ve already forgotten!” Penny said brightly.

Theresa looked confused but dropped the subject. “How do you like Nowhere so far, Andrew?”

Andrew looked at Tom and Penny. “I’m very lucky to be working for Tom. Between his guidance and the chef’s cooking, I’ve basically been spoiled,” Andrew explained. “Oh, and I can’t forget Martha. Her biscuits and gravy—let’s put it this way. I thought my mother’s biscuits and gravy was the best meal in the world. Martha’s biscuits put my mother’s to shame, unfortunately—but don’t tell my mother that!”

Theresa, Tom, and Penny all broke out into laughter. Edna Petunia wandered over. “What’s all this commotion about?”

“Andrew was just appreciating Martha’s cooking,” Tom told Edna Petunia.

Edna Petunia smirked. “Everything she learned, she learned from me!”

“Then I am indebted to you,” Andrew said seriously.

Edna Petunia giggled and patted Andrew on the shoulder. “You’re a good one, Andrew Ford. A very good one indeed.” With that, she ambled over to Cletus, who was talking to another one of the Sanders sisters. As she walked, she pulled out a hip flask and took a long sip.

Andrew looked at Theresa, Penny, and Tom quizzically.

“That’s her cough medicine,” Theresa explained sweetly.

“Is she ill?” Andrew asked politely.

This set off Theresa, Penny, and Tom into another fit of laughter. Andrew felt fortunate to work for such an interesting family. As usual, his eyes were drawn back to Martha, whose hair had fallen into her face as she bent down to speak to her nephew. She brushed a loose strand behind her ear, and Andrew was struck by how beautiful she looked against the backdrop of open plains.

He wished Martha would join in on the easy camaraderie the McClains seemed to share with all of the other Sanders sisters and their parents. He wanted to speak openly with her, to find out all about her past and her deepest desires for the future. “Please excuse me.”

Andrew walked over to Martha, who was playing with little Robby. “Hi, Robby! How would you like to play horse?”

Robby looked up at Andrew, confused. “Horse?”

Andrew bent down, picked Robby up, and placed him on his shoulders. He took off at a gallop. Robby squealed in glee.

Martha shook her head and laughed at Andrew’s antics.

A few moments later, Andrew and Robby returned, and Andrew set Robby back onto the ground. “How are you today, Martha?” Andrew asked.

Martha looked down at her feet. “I’m fine. How are you?”

“I’m fantastic.” Andrew smiled broadly, wishing he would be able to make Martha smile, too.

Robby spotted his brothers, and Martha watched as he ran off to play with them.

“He really seems to like you,” Andrew commented.

Martha shrugged. “He likes all of his aunts.”

“Yes, but you take special care of him. I’ve seen you with him. You’re very good with all the boys.” Andrew tried to get Martha to meet his gaze.

Martha looked at her hands. “Thank you. He’s sweet.”

“I’m sure you’ll make an excellent mother one day,” Andrew

continued, hoping he wasn't being too bold.

"I don't know about that . . ." Martha began.

"Why not?" Andrew's face was full of concern.

Martha didn't know how to express what she wanted to say. She had never thought she would marry, but how could she tell that to Andrew? If she could believe Penny, marriage was something Andrew was actively thinking about. She didn't want to scare him away.

Then again, it probably didn't matter. There was no way a handsome young man like Andrew would ever end up with a young woman like her. She was too plain and quiet to keep his attention for more than a short while. He would probably end up with someone like Mary Sibley—a girl who was pretty, cheerful, and had lots of friends.

Martha had seen Mr. Sibley take Andrew aside. She felt sure they had been talking about marriage. Whatever feelings Martha had for Andrew, she needed to forget about them. "Please excuse me. I need to speak to my family." Martha stepped away before Andrew had a chance to respond.

Andrew stood alone. Although he was taken aback, he was also more determined than ever to get Martha Sanders to open up to him. There had to be a way. She was clearly hiding something behind her expressive, dark eyes. But what was it?



MARTHA CHANGED the linens on the children's beds in the main house. She looked lovingly at the toy train and ball that sat on a shelf in Robby's room. She had never envisioned herself as someone who would get married and have children, but now that she was spending so much time with her nephews, she had started to think about it more and more.

She envisioned herself greeting a husband as he came home from work with a hot-cooked meal and gently rubbing a swollen belly. She had watched many of her sisters go through pregnancy and childbirth, and she wondered what it would be like when it was her turn one day. She hoped that if she did have children, they'd be as sweet as little Robby.

He loved his Aunt Martha and was thrilled any time she was around. He often asked her how she was feeling or what she was doing at any particular point in the day, and they would play outside for hours once Martha's chores were done for the day. He was a sweet, inquisitive little boy, and Martha enjoyed every moment they spent together.

Next, Martha went to the bunkhouse. It was the cook's day off, and it was Martha's turn to fill in. She chopped vegetables, preparing to

make a soup for lunch.

A half hour later, the sound of men entering the bunkhouse startled Martha, snapping her out of her reverie. Although she was in the small kitchen of the bunkhouse, she could overhear their conversation.

“Don’t wait too long. There aren’t many young women in Nowhere!” a man’s voice advised. Martha recognized him as one of the hired hands. The men that worked on the ranch took their meals separately from the family, so Martha rarely saw them.

“I’ll take that into consideration.” Andrew’s deep voice also carried into the kitchen.

Another man chimed in. “You should stay a single man for as long as possible. Once you marry, your life becomes dull and boring.”

Martha’s face flushed. Why were they talking about Andrew marrying? Were they talking about Mary Sibley?

“Don’t listen to him, Andrew. You should marry now while the girl is still young and can fulfill her wifely duties, if you know what I mean,” the first man retorted.

Martha felt dizzy. She didn’t want to listen to this anymore. She went over to the door that separated the kitchen from the main hall of the bunkhouse, walking softly so no one would hear her. She gently pushed the door shut. She put her ear to the door and was relieved that she could no longer hear the men’s voices.

When the soup was done, Martha carried it out into the bunkhouse and set it on the table without a word. A few of the men thanked her, but she simply nodded and turned away.

As she cleaned the kitchen, she replayed Andrew’s words in her head. He hadn’t mentioned any one woman in particular, but his friends had acted like he had someone in mind. Martha wondered what he had told them about her, and if it was Mary Sibley, as she suspected.

She hadn’t seen them together, but that didn’t mean anything. Andrew could have easily taken one of Tom’s horses or wagons to the Sibley’s home. For all Martha knew, they were already courting and talking of marriage and a family.

Martha was surprised to realize that hot tears were stinging her eyes. She hadn’t cried in a very long time, and she couldn’t believe she was shedding tears over a man she barely knew. She didn’t have time to cry. There was work to be done. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and continued on her way into one of the orphan’s cabins.

Martha walked into the empty cabin and found the bed sloppily made, likely one of the orphans in a rush to begin the day’s work. Tom’s men began work as the sun rose each morning and worked until

dinner time with only a short break to eat lunch. She smiled and tugged the loose sheets off the bed, gathering them so she could wash them.

She fitted a clean sheet onto the bed and remade it so that each corner was neat and tidy. She stepped back, admiring her handiwork, then moved on to the next cabin.

Soon, it was time to begin dinner. As Martha walked back into the main house, she found her thoughts drifting back to the conversation she'd overheard earlier. Who had the men been talking about? Was Andrew a taken man?

She tried to shift her thoughts toward the dinner she was about to prepare, but thoughts of Andrew kept running through her mind. She had never thought of a man as much as she thought of him, and now she couldn't get him out of her head. What was she going to do?

## Chapter 4

Another week passed, and Martha only saw Andrew at church again. She watched enviously as Andrew and Mary smiled together after the service. Mary threw her head back and let out a huge guffaw, and Martha found herself feeling hurt and left out.

Later, Andrew sought Martha out before they all piled into wagons to go back to the McLain ranch. "How are you, Martha?"

"Fine." Martha didn't feel like talking to Andrew. Even though she knew she had no claim on him, she had felt horrible when she had seen him talking to Mary.

Andrew leaned in close, lowering his voice so the others wouldn't hear. "I was hoping we could speak some time. I'd like to get to know you better."

Martha frowned. She felt like he was only saying that because he felt bad for her. He and Mary Sibley probably laughed about poor, unfortunate Martha Sanders. Martha wasn't interested in his pity. "I don't think that would be appropriate."

Andrew looked taken aback. "I'd like to spend time with you, Martha. I enjoy your company."

"Do you enjoy it as much as you enjoy Mary Sibley's?" Martha asked angrily. Her vision blurred, and she felt too upset to say anything else, so she turned abruptly, rushing off until she found one of her nephews to play with.

She had never been this affected by another person before, and she didn't like it. She preferred to keep to herself. That way, she didn't have to worry about what other people said or did. No matter what she tried to pay attention to, she couldn't shake the image of Andrew speaking with Mary.

Martha didn't wish ill upon Mary Sibley. Although she was spoiled and could be obnoxious, Mary would probably be a perfect wife and mother for Andrew's children. But every time she thought about it, she could feel her pulse begin to race and her cheeks flush.

Andrew watched Martha flounce away, befuddled. "What did I do wrong?" Andrew murmured to himself. The more time he spent with Martha, the more confused he became.

“What’s that?” Tom approached Andrew and clapped him on the back.

“Nothing,” Andrew said dejectedly.

Tom could tell something was wrong. “What is it?”

Andrew waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You seem perturbed. Tell me what it is,” Tom insisted. He had learned not to let emotions fester among his team. They did backbreaking, grueling work day in and day out. There was little room for error, so everyone had to be focused, and that meant not keeping any thoughts hidden or secret.

“I keep trying to get closer to Martha, but she keeps running away from me!” Andrew exclaimed. “Have I done something to offend her?”

Tom shook his head. “Honestly, Andrew, Martha is a bit of a mystery to me. I like to think I have good relationships with all of Penny’s sisters, but Martha in particular has always been more distant than the other girls.”

Andrew nodded. “I can see that. Many of the Sanders girls seem bubbly and outgoing. Martha’s different—not that it’s a bad thing—but I see her as less open and forthcoming as the others. She seems to be hiding something. And I want to get to know her.”

“Are you feeling the pressure to marry?” Tom asked.

Andrew smiled, startled by his blunt question. “I wasn’t before, but now the other men are telling me that it’s hard to find eligible young women in Nowhere.”

Tom sighed. “They’re not wrong. It would behoove you to marry quickly because single women in Nowhere are rare. It’s a small town, and most of the Sanders sisters are already married. They’re *most* of the young women in town.”

“I see your point,” Andrew replied. “I’m sure Mary Sibley would be a fine match, but there’s something about Martha that I can’t stop thinking about.”

“Oh, no.” Tom looked at Andrew in a new light. “I know that look.”

“What look?” Andrew was confused.

“You’re in love,” Tom said. He put his hand on Andrew’s shoulder.

Andrew scoffed. “How could I be in love with Martha? We have barely even had a conversation!”

Tom shrugged. “Answer this for me. Do you think about her every day?”

“Yes, of course. I always pass by her cabin.” Andrew didn’t know where Tom was going with this line of questioning.

“Do you think about ways to brighten her day and make her smile?” Tom asked.

“Of course,” Andrew said.



“Do you imagine what it might be like to be her husband?” Tom continued.

“Yes, but isn’t that natural?” Andrew replied.

“And finally, is she the first thing you think about in the morning and the last thing you think about before you fall asleep?” Tom pressed on.

“I don’t see how that’s pertinent—” Andrew began.

Tom cut him off. “Answer the question.”

“Yes,” Andrew admitted.

“Oh, yes. Just as I suspected. You’re in love with a Sanders sister!” Tom whooped cheerfully.

Andrew winced. “Sh. Please, not so loudly!”

Tom grinned. “I have one bit of advice for you, if you want it.”

“Anything,” Andrew said. Now that Tom had said it out loud, Andrew had to admit that it was true. He was in love with Martha Sanders. Even though it seemed like she had no interest in him in a romantic sense, he had to try. He would do whatever it took to convince her that his intentions were good.

“Do *not* cross Edna Petunia,” Tom said. “Ever. Got it?”

Andrew frowned. “She seems like a sweet old woman, maybe a bit batty. How bad could she be?”

Tom looked Andrew straight in the eye. “Trust me. You do *not* want to find out.”

Andrew was confused, but he trusted Tom’s word. Although he was curious why Tom seemed afraid of an elderly woman, he decided to drop the subject and get back to the matter at hand. “What does that have to do with Martha? How can I make her see that I’m serious about pursuing her?”

Tom thought for a moment. “Have you asked Cletus for her hand? She’ll know you’re serious then.”

Andrew gulped. He hadn’t thought of that. “I’d like to have at least one full conversation with her before I propose marriage, don’t you think?”

Tom winked. “All I know is that in my case, I knew on first sight that Penny would be my wife, and I wasted no time in trying to convince her of it.”

“Thank you, Tom,” Andrew replied. “I’ll think about it. I appreciate your help.”

Although Tom was helpful, Andrew wished his younger brother were there to counsel him. Although Andrew was older by a year, his brother Alexander had always seemed wiser and more knowledgeable, especially when it came to social custom. All of the girls in the small town the Ford brothers had grown up in seemed to throw themselves at Alexander, seeking his attention. Once Alexander was ready to

marry, he would have his pick of brides from the little town.

Andrew wondered what Alexander would say if he were here now. He would probably tell him to stop wasting his time and start aggressively pursuing Martha. But Andrew still felt strange about the whole situation. He thought about Martha night and day and wanted to be with her desperately. Whether it meant seeing her, talking to her, or engaging in private activities that he had only imagined. And yet, he had no idea how she felt about *him*. It seemed like every time he thought he was about to get close, she pulled away. He never advanced, only ended up farther away.

Andrew sighed as the McClain family and the other men began to pile into the wagons to head home. As he was about to follow them, he felt a sharp pinch on his behind. He gasped and turned around.

Standing in front of him was none other than Edna Petunia Sanders. Andrew was too shocked to say anything.

"Hm. I overheard one of your admirers droning on about your buttocks and wanted to see what all the fuss was about." Edna Petunia frowned.

"Excuse me?" Andrew was bewildered.

"Not bad. It'll do." With that, Edna Petunia left and joined her family at their own wagon.

"You coming?" Tom shouted from one of the wagons. A few of the orphaned boys shifted to make room.

Andrew turned around and rushed over to the wagon and climbed in. "That was one of the strangest things I've ever experienced in my life."

Tom grinned as he started the horses. "I see you've met Edna Petunia."



MARTHA GUIDED Robby's horse in an easy loop around the stable. "Careful," she called up to Robby.

Since Martha had gone to live with the McClains, Robby had become interested in riding horses, just like his big brothers and father did.

Martha had helped break in Ginger, a sweet older horse that was perfect for taking Robby on slow trots around the ranch. Sometimes, Robby became overly excited and hugged Ginger's neck, startling her, so Martha had to remind him to be gentle with her.

"Cake tonight, Aunt Martha?" Robby asked from his perch on the saddle.

Martha shook her head. "Not tonight, Robby. We had cake last night."

“Oh.” Robby looked deflated.

Martha looked him in the eyes. “If you behave yourself tonight and tomorrow, maybe there will be a cake for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Cake!” Robby cheered.

Martha bit her lip to hold back her laughter. Robby loved sweets of all kinds.

Just then, she heard a shout from one of the cabins nearby and turned in the direction of the noise. She accidentally dropped the rope she had been using to lead Ginger around the stable.

There was another high-pitched shriek, and Ginger spooked. Martha swirled around just in time to see Ginger rear up and take off running.

“No!” Martha screamed. She raced after Ginger, seeing Robby hanging onto the saddle with all of his might.

But it was too late. Ginger bucked again, tossing Robby onto the ground. Martha cried out in anguish and rushed to him.

Tears streamed down Robby’s face, and he gasped for breath.

“Sh,” Martha instructed, holding his small, broken frame close to her body. “I’m here now.”

Martha examined Robby’s entire body closely. Though he was covered in mud, he was slowly regaining his breath. His left leg was bent at a strange angle. Martha touched it softly.

Robby howled with pain.

“I’ll be right back, Robby,” Martha told him. She rushed over to the cabins, where she had first heard the scream coming from. “Someone, come quick! Little Robby’s hurt!”

Next, Martha ran into the main house and called out for Penny. “Penny, come quick! Robby needs you!”

In less than a few minutes’ time, Tom, Penny, and an assortment of their children and orphans surrounded Robby. Martha brushed tears from her face as she looked on, feeling helpless.

Robby’s eyes were closed, his face scrunched up in pain. Tom helped his son sit up, and Penny tenderly stroked his face. Robby opened his eyes and seemed to relax once he saw his mother.

Tom patted his shoulder. “You’ll be all right, son.”

Robby gulped, and his eyes searched through the crowd that had gathered around them. Martha couldn’t watch any more. She ran away from the crowd and into her cabin. She threw herself down on the bed and allowed the tears to drench her pillow. How could she have been so careless? If she’d kept her eyes on Robby, she would have been able to calm Ginger and prevent Robby from being thrown from the horse.

Martha prayed that Robby would make a full recovery. His leg had seemed broken. Ever since her childhood, she had vowed that once

she was an adult, she would take care of and protect children in her care. She had let Robby down. She didn't know if she could ever forgive herself.

After a little while, Martha sat up and took a few deep breaths. She felt terrible about what had happened and even worse about the way she had reacted to it. Instead of helping to take care of Robby, she had run away. She would never be able to have children of her own. She couldn't even assist a child in need.

As difficult as it would be to face the others, she knew she had to return so she could start to prepare for dinner. Penny and Tom would likely be preoccupied with helping Robby. Martha wiped the tears from her face and stood. She left the cabin and walked back to where Robby had fallen.

Tom was dispersing some of the crowd that had gathered around the boy. "Back to work. The day's not over yet. Robby will be fine."

Penny sat next to Robby, patting him on the back and whispering soothing words to him. She smiled at Martha. "Tom sent John to get Dr. Harvey or Dr. Bennett. One of them will make Robby's leg as good as new!"

Martha nodded, still too emotional to speak.

Penny's expression grew concerned. "You look so upset, Martha. What's wrong? Did Ginger hurt you, too?"

Martha shook her head.

"Please don't worry, Martha. Robby's going to be fine. These things happen. Oh, but it's probably close to dinnertime, and I haven't even started anything!" Penny fretted.

Martha found her voice. "I'll get started on it."

Penny's smile returned. "Thank you, Martha. We're really lucky to have you!"

Martha spun around and rushed toward the main house before Penny could say anything else. She felt a terrible sense of guilt over what had happened to Robby. She was glad to hear that Dr. Iris Harvey, the longtime town doctor, or her nephew, Dr. Stephen Bennett, who was married to her sister Hope, was on the way. Both doctors were very knowledgeable and had nursed various members of the Sanders family back to health on many prior occasions.

Once she arrived in the kitchen, Martha stuck her head into the pantry and surveyed her options. Usually, she and Penny discussed what they wanted to cook for the family that evening during the day. In all the commotion, the thought of what to cook for dinner hadn't even crossed Martha's mind until now.

Martha thought for a moment, then decided to make a beef stew. Martha was still reeling from her horror at seeing Robby fall, and she knew that some of the children would feel emotional as well. A hearty

stew would put everyone's mind at ease, filling them up before bed.

Martha took a deep breath and reached for a large soup pot. Although it had been an unusual day, she would make sure that dinner was served promptly on time. She had let Robby down earlier, and she promised herself that would never happen again.

## Chapter 5

“Aunt Martha, read me another, please!” Robby cried.

Martha hid a smile behind her hand. “I don’t know, Robby. You should get some rest. You’ve had enough excitement for the day.”

Robby was still confined to bed. His leg was wrapped in a splint Dr. Bennett had made. Martha and Penny took turns staying with him while the other woman cooked and did the daily chores. Because he couldn’t manage the stairs, they had set him up in an empty cabin a few doors down from Martha’s. Martha slept in his room on a cot set up in the corner in case he needed anything during the night.

Since Robby had to stay very still in order for his leg to heal, Martha had begun reading to him from his favorite books. Robby couldn’t get enough of Martha’s reading.

Now it was late, nearly time for him to go to bed.

“One more,” Robby begged.

“All right,” Martha sighed.

As she flipped to the first page of the book, there was a knock on the door. Martha looked up in surprise and a little concern. They weren’t expecting anyone until the following morning, when Penny would relieve Martha and Martha would make breakfast for the McClain family.

Martha patted Robby’s hand reassuringly. “I need to see who is at the door. I’ll be right back.” She stood up and walked over to the door, then opened it cautiously.

To her surprise, Andrew Ford stood in front of her. His face was lit by the final rays of sunlight, and he looked even more handsome than the last time she’d seen him.

“What are you doing here?” Martha asked.

Andrew held up a book with his right hand. “For some reason, I packed this book when I came here. It was one of my favorites as a child. I thought Robby might be getting bored, cooped up in here all day and night. So I thought I’d read to him.”

Martha’s heart did a flip. It was so thoughtful and kind of Andrew to think about Robby during his recovery. She had thought he was a good man, and this proved it. But she wasn’t sure about another book

so late in the evening. She looked back at Robby. "I don't know. It's past his bedtime."

Robby overheard their conversation. "One more story, Aunt Martha! Please?"

Martha sighed and stepped aside to let Andrew in. "Fine, but only *one* more."

Robby cheered, and Andrew walked over to Robby's bedside. He started to sit down in the chair that was there but then stopped. "I'm sorry. Were you sitting here?"

Martha waved her hand. "Don't worry about it. You can sit there. I'll walk around. I need to tidy a few things."

"All right." Andrew eased his tall, muscular frame into the chair. He held up the book for Robby to see. "*The Tale of Mother Goose*," Andrew announced the title. He flipped the book open and began to read.

Martha began to pick up some of the odd belongings that were scattered about the cabin, but she quickly found that she couldn't focus on cleaning. Andrew's voice was deep, rich, and melodic. If Martha had been sitting or lying down, she'd have drifted off to sleep. She peeked over at Robby and saw that he was listening with rapt attention.

She thought it was probably nice for Robby to have a visitor other than his mother and aunt. Two weeks had passed since his fall, and Dr. Bennett had recommended at least four more weeks of rest to allow his leg to mend. He was worried if Robby tried to put too much pressure on it, the bone wouldn't fully heal, and Robby would walk with a permanent limp. Martha was determined not to allow that to happen. She followed each one of Dr. Bennett's instructions to the smallest detail and watched Robby like a hawk.

As Andrew continued to read to Robby, the boy's eyes grew heavy with sleep. Eventually, he laid his head back against his pillow, and his breath became measured and even. A playful smile danced across Andrew's lips. "I guess he won't find out how the story ends."

"Sh," Martha whispered, worried Robby would wake up. He was a light sleeper and sometimes woke up at the slightest of sounds.

Andrew gestured outside the cabin, and Martha followed him. The night was hot and dry, and Martha watched as the sun descended behind the hills off in the distance.

"Thank you for coming and reading to him. I could tell he really enjoyed it," Martha said.

"It's no problem at all. I feel bad for the poor little one, not able to go outside and play with his brothers," Andrew told her. "If I were in his position, I'd be very upset."

"He's taking it very well," Martha explained. "I know what you

mean, though. Penny and I are trying to make sure he has everything he needs to make a full recovery.”

“And you’re clearly doing a tremendous job,” Andrew said. “But I’m sure even you need a break.”

“A break?” Martha was puzzled. What did he mean by that?

“From what Tom tells me, you’ve been staying here each night and spending most of your days by Robby’s side. That’s admirable, but are you getting any sleep?” Andrew pointed out.

“I don’t need sleep as much as Robby needs it. Once he’s recovered, then I’ll go back to my cabin and get a good night’s rest,” Martha said defensively.

“All I’m trying to say is that no one would fault you if you wanted to take an evening off. Maybe I could stay with Robby some night,” Andrew offered.

“You would do that?” Martha was shocked. “You’re not even related to him.”

Andrew looked at Martha for a long time before responding. When he finally spoke, he looked her straight in the eye. “Robby’s important to you, and you’re important to me.”

Martha felt uncomfortable. She immediately looked away. What was Andrew saying? Part of her hoped he was trying to tell her that he cared about her in a romantic way, but she knew better than to get her hopes up. She’d seen the way he’d talked to Mary Sibley at church. Compared to Mary, Martha didn’t stand a chance. Mary was pretty and popular and could talk to anyone for hours. Martha didn’t care for small talk and preferred to keep to herself most of the time.

“It’s fine,” Martha said. “He’s my responsibility. It’s my fault he got hurt in the first place.”

Andrew put his hand on Martha’s arm, and her heart began to race. “Martha, what do you mean, it’s your fault he got hurt? That’s not true.”

Tears welled in Martha’s eyes as she thought back to the horrible day when Robby had been injured. “I wasn’t watching him closely enough. I got distracted by a noise I heard, and then before I knew it, the horse had startled and Robby was on the ground. It’s all my fault!”

Andrew shook his head firmly and tugged Martha closer to him. “Martha, that’s absolutely not true. You’re no more responsible for Robby’s accident than I am.”

“You? How would it be your fault?” Martha cried, surprised.

“It’s my responsibility to oversee all the horses. If I’d have done a better job getting to know Ginger, I’d have found out how easily she spooks and made sure none of the children ever got near her. So see, it’s my fault,” Andrew said, an easy grin spreading across his face.

“But that’s ridiculous!” Martha protested. “You couldn’t have



predicted what Ginger was going to do to Robby.”

“Exactly my point,” Andrew said. “Neither could you.”

Martha was too flustered to respond immediately. She looked at her shoes.

Andrew moved his arm so that he was holding Martha’s hand in his. Martha felt a tingling sensation in her stomach. She didn’t know if she had ever been so close to a man before.

“Martha, it seems to me you blame yourself for things you can’t control. Have you always been this way?” Andrew said softly as the sunlight faded.

Martha opened her mouth, but the words wouldn’t come. She shook her head rapidly. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe it would help to talk about it,” Andrew encouraged.

Martha wanted to tell Andrew everything she was thinking and feeling, but she knew she couldn’t. There were certain things about her past that she’d sworn she would never reveal to anyone because she knew they’d think less of her. Again, she shook her head.

Andrew took a deep breath. “I’ll start. I was born into a family where I never fit in. I have two older brothers and one younger brother. My older brothers treated me poorly because we never shared the same values. My younger brother has always been kind to me. He’s my best friend. But the rest of my family is obsessed with making money. That’s all they seem to care about. I moved here to escape the life they’ve always wanted for me. I still miss my younger brother, but I know this is where I’m meant to be. Especially because of the people I’ve met in Nowhere.” He smiled at Martha knowingly. “See? That wasn’t so bad. Now it’s your turn.”

Martha felt panic rising in her chest. She appreciated that Andrew was telling her about his past, but she wasn’t ready to do the same. “I think . . . it’s getting late. You should leave.”

Andrew looked stung, as if someone had hit him. “Are you sure? I was having a nice time talking with you.”

Martha swallowed. “I’m sure.” She looked away so she wouldn’t have to meet his piercing gaze.

Andrew sighed. “All right. If you want me to leave, I’ll leave.” He walked away from the small cabin, then hesitated. He turned around. “If you change your mind, you know where you can find me.”

Martha walked back into the cabin, her face flushed from being so close to Andrew. She knew that he was upset with her for withdrawing from him, but she couldn’t tell him the truth. She was too ashamed and embarrassed.

Martha gently shut the cabin door and went to check on Robby. His chest rose and fell steadily as he slept. Martha wondered what he was dreaming about. She prayed again that Robby would make a

complete recovery. He had his whole life ahead of him, and Martha would be devastated if he had a permanent impairment because of her negligence.

Martha pulled Robby's blanket snugly around him so it wouldn't fall off during the night. She went over to her cot and prepared for bed. As she drifted off to sleep, her mind replayed her conversation with Andrew Ford over and over again. Did she actually have a chance with him?



ANDREW HEAVED a bulky box of feed into the loft of the stable. "Seems they get heavier each month," he joked.

Tom flashed Andrew a smile. "Maybe you're just getting weaker each month."

"How could you say that? You've hurt my feelings!" Andrew teased. He and Tom had developed an easy relationship over the past few months. He was always happy when his work involved pairing up with Tom.

"I know you're only joking, but is there anything going on with you right now? You've seemed a bit down lately." Tom's kind face wore a concerned expression.

Andrew grimaced. He felt embarrassed talking about it. Tom handed him another box. "I don't want to trouble you with my petty problems."

"Please. Maybe I can help," Tom coaxed.

Andrew hefted the box into the loft and turned to look at Tom. "Honestly? Woman troubles."

Tom chuckled. "I've been there."

"You have? You and Penny seem like you have the perfect relationship," Andrew commented.

"It wasn't always that way." Tom wiped his brow. "I've told you that it took me some time to convince her to be my wife, right?"

Andrew nodded.

"She was afraid of how committed I was to her. I knew so early on and had such strong convictions about our relationship and future together, and she simply wasn't there yet. It takes time. What seems to be your issue?" Tom raised an eyebrow. "And more importantly, who's the lucky woman?"

"I think you know who the woman is," Andrew said, feeling self-conscious.

Tom let out a cheer that echoed through the barn. "I'm glad to hear it. I was worried you may have changed your mind, since I understand she can be a bit . . . closed off."

Andrew nodded. "That's exactly it. I'm not sure what to do. She hasn't told me *anything* about her past. Don't you think that's odd?"

Tom shrugged. "Hard to say. Penny doesn't like to talk about the time she spent in the orphanage in New York either. Says she'd prefer to look forward rather than backward. Maybe it's the same for Martha."

"I'm not sure about that." Andrew shook his head. "It really seems like there's something she just can't or doesn't want to tell me. How can you have a relationship if two people aren't willing to talk to each other?"

Tom pondered this. "There must be a way to get her to talk to you."

"That's what I thought, but I've tried everything," Andrew explained. "I even told her about my family is like and some of the challenges we have with one another. But then she asked me to leave."

Tom's expression shifted. "Andrew, I hope you haven't been sneaking around and bothering Martha in her cabin. It's fine that you have feelings for her, but you need to keep it appropriate."

"I visited her last night in Robby's cabin. I wanted to give her a break, so I read him a story," Andrew told Tom.

"Ah." Tom brightened. "I'm glad the two of you weren't alone. I like you, but there are certain things that can't happen on my watch." Tom rubbed his chin. "Hm. I'm not sure why she wouldn't want to open up to you. I know she is on the quieter side, but I can't think of what she could be hiding."

"Me, either." Andrew agreed with Tom, relaxing his shoulders to take a break between loads. "But I sure hope I can find out."

## Chapter 6

Martha hugged Robby goodbye and made sure he was comfortable before she left the cabin to go to church. It was one of the weeks the McClains were going into Nowhere to attend the service, and Penny was staying back with Robby while Martha went with the rest of the group.

“He’ll be fine,” Penny reassured Martha. “He’s lucky to have such an attentive aunt. We’re all lucky to have you around, Martha!”

Martha smiled at her sister. She appreciated Penny’s grace, but she still blamed herself for Robby’s fall. “I’ll see you both when I get back.”

Martha exited the cabin and joined the group of boys, orphans, and men as they prepared to leave the ranch. Andrew waved to her from one of the wagons, and Martha saw there was still room inside of it. Before he could say anything, she turned away and climbed into one of the other wagons. Martha avoided Andrew’s gaze, hoping he wouldn’t try to call out to her.

Martha was silent on the way to Nowhere, listening to the men and boys chatter about work on the ranch, people they knew in Bagley, and what they wanted to do after church.

When they arrived, they rushed into the church building in order to be on time for the service. From the front of the church, Micah looked up and smiled merrily at the McClain clan. Martha knew it made him happy when they attended services since it was so much easier for the McClains to go to church in Bagley.

Martha felt relieved to be around all of her sisters aside from Penny as well as Edna Petunia and Cletus. She always felt more comfortable when her family was around. Although the service passed quickly, Martha tried to memorize the words Micah was saying so she could repeat them to Robby and Penny later. She knew Penny would appreciate that.

After Micah had dismissed the congregation, everyone flocked out to the lawn as usual. Martha scanned the crowd, trying to figure out which one of her sisters she should approach first. Before she could decide, she heard a loud voice calling her name.

“Martha Sanders! Where have you been?” Edna Petunia tapped Martha on the shoulder, and Martha spun around. Edna Petunia’s hands were on her hips, and she wore an indignant expression on her face.

“What do you mean, Edna Petunia?” Martha asked, confused. “I’m living with Penny and Tom on the ranch.” She looked around for Cletus, but he was nowhere to be found.

“You don’t write, you haven’t been back for dinner. . . . If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to forget all about us!” Edna Petunia scoffed.

Just then, Katie, Hattie, and Theresa ran up to Martha.

“Martha!” Katie cried.

“You look so pretty!” Hattie exclaimed.

“I think she looks normal,” Theresa commented. Hattie elbowed her.

“Hi, girls.” Martha stifled a laugh. Her younger sisters always made her laugh.

“What’s the ranch like, Martha?” Katie asked.

“The men look so handsome, Martha!” Hattie declared.

“Is it true there’s a separate cook for the bunkhouse?” Theresa wanted to know.

“Girls, settle down. She’ll answer your questions one by one,” Edna Petunia scolded.

“It’s fine,” Martha said. “It’s been a little stressful lately because Robby hurt his leg in a fall. That’s where Penny is, taking care of him.”

“That’s right, we heard about his accident. How is he doing?” Theresa asked, her eyes full of concern.

Martha nodded slowly. “Dr. Bennett said he’ll be fine, but he needs to stay still for a few more weeks. Penny and I have been taking turns sitting with him.”

Edna Petunia’s expression softened a tiny bit. “That’s still no excuse for not coming to visit us.”

Martha smiled. “I’d love to come visit you once Robby’s back on his feet. I miss you all.”

Edna Petunia smiled. “We miss you, too, dear.”

Just then, Martha’s eyes were drawn to a commotion happening a few feet away. Gerald Sibley raced toward Andrew and put an arm around his shoulder.

“We need to talk. I haven’t received a response to your letter yet!” Gerald said anxiously.

Martha’s brow furled. What letter was Gerald talking about?

Andrew looked around, seeing that many people had stopped their conversations and were now paying attention to him and Gerald. “Can

we talk about this another time?"

Gerald smiled, but it seemed forced to Martha. "Now's as good a time as any! We are looking forward to seeing what you have to say, son."

"I haven't made any decisions yet," Andrew said quietly.

Gerald looked surprised. "Decisions? There are hardly any decisions to make!"

Veronica Sibley approached both men. "You know, a summer wedding might be nice . . . but I've always loved a spring wedding, too."

Martha's heart began pounding. Her suspicions had been correct. The Sibleys were talking to Andrew about a wedding. He was going to marry Mary Sibley!

Andrew looked uncomfortable. "I think it's too soon to make those kinds of plans."

Gerald's expression turned severe. "Very well. If that's the case, I'll have you know there are several other suitors who have asked for Mary's hand already. I was hoping you'd beat the others, but now it seems you're slipping behind. It's a shame . . . you know there aren't many other eligible young women in Nowhere or Bagley."

Andrew gulped. "Please, sir. Let's discuss this privately." He felt aware of all the people paying attention to their conversation and didn't want to make a scene.

Gerald let out a long sigh. "I've tried to help you, Andrew. I truly have. But if you can't recognize an opportunity like this, I can't help you at all." Gerald took his wife's arm and steered her away from Andrew. Martha watched as Gerald and Veronica found Mary, who was laughing with a few of her friends nearby, and walked over to their own wagon.

Martha's heart was still racing. She didn't understand what had just happened, but it sounded a lot to her like Andrew and Mary were meant to be wed. A few of the other men from the McClain ranch came over and clapped Andrew on the back.

"Sounds like we'll be hearing wedding bells soon!" one exclaimed.

Andrew smiled weakly at them. He didn't know what to say, truly. Just then, his eyes caught Martha's. Before she looked away, he thought he saw hurt and confusion in them. He took a step toward her, but before he could get close, she set off to go speak to her sister Sarah Jane.

Tom approached the men. "What was all that about?"

Andrew sighed wearily. "Gerald has sent me a few letters discussing the idea of me courting his daughter, Mary."

One of the men let out a whoop, and Tom looked at the man sternly until he calmed down. "And?" Tom prodded.

“And I’m not sure what to do about it.” Andrew looked around to make sure no one was paying attention. The churchgoers had moved back to their own conversations.

“She’s a lovely young lady,” another man put in.

“I can’t deny that,” Andrew admitted. “But I have my eye on another.”

Tom nodded. “Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to speak with Andrew privately.” Tom put his arm around Andrew’s shoulder and steered him away from the rest of the men. “You still have Martha on your mind, don’t you?”

Andrew nodded. “That’s correct. It’s bad, Tom. She’s all I can think about.”

Tom chuckled softly. “I know what that’s like, trust me.”

“But what can I do?” Andrew moaned. “Martha seems to want nothing to do with me. Maybe I should court Mary so I can get to know her.”

“I can’t tell you what to do,” Tom said. “That’s up to you. But I know if it were me, I wouldn’t give up so easily.”

“I’ve been trying,” Andrew protested. “I don’t know what I can do differently.”

Tom paused. “Have you told her everything you just told me?”

Andrew thought for a moment. “I don’t think I’ve said it as directly as I’ve said it to you.”

“I think you need to do that, Andrew,” Tom advised solemnly. “If you tell her how you really feel, and she still doesn’t want to open up with you, then you should probably consider another woman. But I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Andrew nodded. “Thank you, Tom. I appreciate your advice. I hope it doesn’t come to that either. It’s just a feeling I have, but it’s the strangest thing. I feel like that girl is my soulmate.”

## Chapter 7

Andrew waited for the perfect evening to tell Martha how he felt about her. He let Penny in on his plan and coordinated with her so it was a night when Penny was planning to stay with Robby in the cabin.

Andrew waited with a bouquet of flowers for Martha to come back to her cabin. As she approached, he stepped out in front of her. It was a still night on the ranch. Tom had let Andrew off early that day so he could wash and dress nicely. He wore his best Sunday attire and held out the bouquet of lilies toward Martha.

“What’s this?” Martha asked, stunned.

“These are for you, Martha. I have something I’d like to tell you.” Andrew felt more nervous than he ever had in his entire life. “Let’s take a little walk.”

Martha was too surprised to disagree, so she followed Andrew as he walked to a little clearing near both cabins. The clearing was surrounded by trees on all sides. Andrew had picked this place because he didn’t want the men—or anyone else for that matter—to see them as they were ending their workday and going to the bunkhouse for dinner. Andrew intended on having a private conversation with Martha and didn’t want any interruptions.

Andrew took Martha’s arm in his and cleared his throat. “Martha, I want to be forthright and direct with you. There’s something that’s been on my mind for some time now, and I want to share it with you.”

Martha patiently waited to hear what Andrew wanted to say. He seemed nervous and fidgety, but she decided to let him speak before she responded.

Andrew took a deep breath. He stopped walking and turned to face her, grabbing her hands in his. Martha felt her heart leap a little as they touched. Being close to him felt so warm and right that she could hardly think straight. “Martha Sanders, I have strong feelings for you. Stronger than any feelings I’ve ever had before, for anyone or anything.”

Martha gasped but didn’t say anything. She could tell that Andrew wasn’t finished yet.



“I’ve tried to get to know you better over the past few months, not because I’m nosy or overbearing, but because I see a real future for our relationship. I’m at the age where it makes sense for me to court a woman, and to eventually take a wife and start a family.” Andrew paused. Martha felt her heart do gymnastics in her chest. “But first, I need to get to know her better. You see, Martha, when I think about the woman I want to marry—it’s you.”

Andrew pulled Martha closer to him and leaned in toward her. “I’ll be forthright. Others are saying I should take a wife, and there are others who seem willing. But Martha, you’re the one I want to get to know better. I want to learn everything there is to know about you.”

Martha felt like she couldn’t breathe. She worried that she would pass out and Andrew would have to carry her back to her cabin. When she tried to speak, she couldn’t find the words. “I—I . . .”

Andrew tilted his head closer. “Marry me, Martha.” He brought his lips gently toward hers. She tipped her head back, wanting to be closer to him. As his lips met hers, she felt a burst of warmth and love spread all through her body.

Andrew gripped Martha closer to him. He squeezed her hands as he kissed her. He longed to press on further, but he didn’t want to scare her. He was afraid to frighten her by saying too much too fast. He pulled back, a look of concern on his face. “Are you all right?”

All Martha could do was nod. She took in a few deep breaths. Her heart sang with joy, but she couldn’t figure out how to express this to Andrew.

“What are you feeling right now?” Andrew whispered.

“I feel . . . I feel . . .” Martha searched for the right words.

Andrew’s brow knitted with concern. “Are you happy?”

Martha gulped. “I’m . . .” She wanted to shout that yes, of course she was happy, but the words wouldn’t come. She took a step back. This was coming out all wrong.

Hurt flashed across Andrew’s face. “Are you saying you don’t want to be with me?”

Martha shook her head hurriedly, but she still was unable to explain herself.

Andrew nodded sadly and dropped her hands. “I understand. You don’t feel the same way as I feel about you. I see.”

Martha’s eyes widened. That wasn’t what she was trying to say at all.

“I won’t bother you any further. I’ll leave you be. But at least let me walk you back to your cabin. It’s getting dark.” Andrew turned in the direction of her cabin and waited for Martha to do the same. He kept a brisk pace, wanting to bid her goodnight and be alone for a while. He felt stung and embarrassed by Martha’s reaction, and

thought it would be best if they didn't see each other for a while.

They approached Martha's cabin, and Martha walked toward the door slowly. "Good night, Andrew," she whispered softly.

"Good night." Andrew's tone was short and sharp. He spun around and headed to his own cabin next door. In a few moments, he had disappeared into his cabin, and Martha let herself into her own.

Tears fell from Martha's eyes as she collapsed onto the bed. Why hadn't she been able to speak up? Andrew was giving her a chance, telling her all the wonderful things that he felt for her. But she hadn't been able to say a single word so he would know that she cared for him, too.

Now it was all but certain that Andrew would wed Mary Sibley. Martha gasped for air as she imagined seeing Mary and Andrew in church together. A horrifying thought struck her. Would Mary move in to the cabin next door? Martha didn't know if she would be able to live so close to the man she cared for and another woman.

Martha wondered if there was anything she could do to help Andrew understand her feelings, but the day had taken its toll on her. The tears slowly subsided as she drifted off to sleep.



IN CHURCH THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Gerald Sibley walked with a spring in his step.

Edna Petunia pointed this out to Cletus. "What's Gerald Sibley got to be so proud about? He looks like he thinks he's a rooster."

Cletus masked a loud guffaw as a cough. Hattie looked up from her seat and shook her head, smiling. "You're not wrong, dear. But we're in church, let's be polite."

Edna Petunia shrugged.

After mass, Gerald and Veronica spread their happy news.

"Andrew Ford is going to court our Mary. You know what that means—an engagement will be coming any week now!" Veronica gushed.

"I suspect he'll buy a parcel of land from Tom McClain, and they'll build a beautiful home on that property outside of Bagley," Gerald explained.

"Much nicer than those cabins!" Veronica sniffed.

Mary stayed quiet, but she glowed with pride and contentment.

Edna Petunia frowned. "I thought Penny told me that Andrew cared for Martha."

"Sh, Edna Petunia!" Sarah Jane called. Sarah Jane hated conflict and didn't want anyone to think negatively of her family. Whatever business there was between Andrew and Martha, she didn't think it

was polite to discuss in front of the Sibleys.

The McClains, Martha, and Andrew weren't in attendance that weekend, so no one knew what they thought of the Sibley family's announcement.

"I think a spring wedding would be lovely!" Veronica confided to Edna Petunia. "And hopefully a baby by next spring."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Edna Petunia said with a smile on her face.

Veronica looked at her quizzically, but Edna Petunia simply unscrewed the lid from her hip flask and took a few sips.

"I just don't think you should get your hopes up." Edna Petunia patted Veronica on the back, then wandered away.

Sarah Jane looked at Veronica apologetically. "I'm sorry about that, Mrs. Sibley. I think what Edna Petunia meant is, we never know what's in God's plan for us, do we?"

Veronica smiled weakly. The Sanders family always had been a bit odd.

Edna Petunia climbed into the wagon next to Cletus. Hattie, Theresa, and Katie were already on board. With a flick of the reins, they set off toward the Sanders' home. "I still don't understand why the Sibleys think Andrew is intended for their daughter Mary. That wasn't what Penny told us."

Earlier in the week, Penny had taken a break from caring for Robby to ride over to the Sanders' house. There, she had confided in them Andrew's plan to propose to Martha. Cletus was a bit disgruntled Andrew hadn't asked for her hand first but ultimately approved the match. Edna Petunia considered it a formal invitation to start planning a wedding.

"It's been a while, I've been out of practice for some time!" Edna Petunia exclaimed.

"That's because you said you were sick of weddings," Theresa pointed out.

"Did I say that?" Edna Petunia asked.

"Yes!" Hattie, Katie, Theresa, and Cletus replied.

Now, Edna Petunia fidgeted with worry. "I suppose this means the proposal went poorly."

"Well, it can't have gone well," Cletus pointed out. "Sounds like we may not have a new son-in-law after all."

Theresa sighed. "That's unfortunate. I liked Andrew."

"Me, too," Katie agreed.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." Edna Petunia grinned. "They're not married yet. Anything could happen."

"Oh, no." Cletus groaned. "What are you planning, dear?"

"Nothing!" Edna Petunia cried.

Cletus sighed. "That's precisely what worries me."

The following day, Edna Petunia donned a cloak, took a horse, and set off for the McClain ranch. She wandered around for a while before falling asleep in the loft of the barn.

She awoke to the sounds of men's voices floating up from the stables below.

"When's the big day?" one man asked.

"I don't know yet," a sheepish voice replied. Edna Petunia instantly recognized it as Andrew's.

"You've asked her, though?" the first man continued.

"Not quite yet," Andrew admitted.

Edna Petunia lowered her head toward the ground, straining to make sure she heard exactly what the men were saying.

"What's taking you so long?" the first man laughed.

"I was actually planning to go there this evening and ask for her hand," Andrew told him.

Edna Petunia sat up straight. Whose hand was Andrew going to ask for?

The first man spoke again. "You'll do well to associate with the Sibley family. They control a great deal of the money in this town."

Edna Petunia heard Andrew sigh. "I don't care about the money. I just hope we're a good match for one another. I don't know her very well."

"Speak for yourself, son. If I were you, I'd have married her already. Good family, the Sibleys." A few moments later, Edna Petunia heard the barn doors slam shut. She peered down from the loft into the stables. The men were gone.

It was time to get to work.

Edna Petunia knocked on the door to the main house. Penny opened it and gave Edna Petunia a big hug. "What are you doing here? I'm so happy to see you!"

"Oh, you know. A few things here and there," Edna Petunia said mysteriously.

Penny sighed. She wondered what Edna Petunia was up to and hoped it wouldn't cause too much trouble. "Come on in."

Edna Petunia helped Penny prepare breakfast and ate biscuits and jam at the table with her grandsons and the orphans.

"Fine lot of bastards you have," Edna Petunia said approvingly.

"Thank you, Edna Petunia," Penny said. She had grown used to Edna Petunia's choice of words over the years.

After they had finished eating, they went to the cabin where Robby was staying. When they arrived, Martha was fluffing the pillows behind Robby's head.

"He's just waking up," Martha explained. She cried out when she noticed Edna Petunia. "Edna Petunia! I didn't expect to see you here."

“Just stopping by to see you. If you don’t mind, may I have a word?” Edna Petunia asked Martha.

Martha looked at Penny. “If it’s okay with Penny.”

“Of course.” Penny waved a hand. “I’ll take it from here.”

Martha and Edna Petunia exited the small cabin, and Martha led Edna Petunia back to her own cabin. As they entered, Edna Petunia admired how neat and tidy Martha kept her quarters.

Edna Petunia put her hands on her hips. “We need to have a talk.”

Martha immediately felt nervous. “About what?”

“I hear a nice, good young man has been talking about his intentions to marry you, and you refused to have any of it. Is that true?” Edna Petunia charged.

Martha looked at her feet. “I don’t know what to say.”

Edna Petunia’s expression softened. “There are no right or wrong answers, Martha. Say what’s in your heart. It’s just me.”

Martha nodded. “I . . . sometimes it’s hard for me to say what I feel.”

“I understand. I know you don’t like to talk about it, but I presume this had something to do with what happened to you before you ended up in that orphanage in New York. Am I right?” Edna Petunia asked gently.

Martha nodded again.

“You know, you can tell me anything, Martha,” Edna Petunia reminded.

“I know that, Edna Petunia, and I appreciate all that you’ve done for me. Sometimes I just think . . . it’s too late. There’s no hope for me to lead a normal life. I’m damaged goods,” Martha confessed.

“Oh, honey.” Edna Petunia held out her arms, and Martha walked closer and allowed Edna Petunia to wrap her in a hug. It was one of the few times Edna Petunia could recall Martha letting her get close. “That’s simply not true. You’re a good person, and you deserve to live a good life.”

“But Edna Petunia, what happened to Robby is entirely my fault!” Martha said, her eyes brimming with tears.

Edna Petunia sat down on the bed and patted a spot next to her. “Come, tell me about it. I’m certain that’s not true.”

Martha took a deep breath and explained all the details from the day of the accident. “Do you see? If I had been paying better attention, Robby wouldn’t have gotten hurt,” she concluded.

Edna Petunia shook her head. “Martha Sanders, that thinking is just plain backwards! I won’t have one of my bastards going around blaming herself for something that was a simple accident. You’re no more responsible for that accident than you are for ending up in an orphanage. It’s just a fact of life. And it sounds like little Robby is on

the mend.”

Martha sighed. “I don’t know. It made me question whether or not I could ever have children one day if I can’t even take care of other people’s children.”

“I will not sit here and listen to such talk, Martha!” Edna Petunia scolded. “You’re a wonderful young woman. Penny and Tom have even told me how lucky they feel to have you here. Now, when are you going to start seeing yourself the same way they do?”

Martha tried to understand what Edna Petunia was saying, but it was difficult to accept. She still felt like something was wrong with her.

“Now,” Edna Petunia continued, “tell me what’s going on with Andrew Ford.”

Fresh tears streamed down Martha’s face. Edna Petunia couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Martha act so emotionally. *She must really care for the fellow!*

“Well,” Martha started out shakily. “I have a hard time speaking in his presence, it turns out. He took me aside a few days ago and told me he wanted to court me. But I . . .”

“What did you say?” Edna Petunia yelled.

“I didn’t say anything,” Martha confessed tearily. “I couldn’t talk. I clammed up, and he left the conversation thinking I wanted nothing to do with him. And now it seems he’s going to propose to Mary Sibley. There’s no hope. Andrew is a lost cause.” Martha looked down at the floor, ashamed of what she had done.

Edna Petunia sighed. “Oh, Martha. When will you start seeing yourself the way we see you?”

“What do you mean?” Martha asked through her tears. The last time she had cried this much, she had been a small child.

“You are acting like you don’t think you should have a man like Andrew Ford—like you ruined things between the two of you because you don’t deserve to be happy,” Edna Petunia explained. “I don’t know why you think so poorly of yourself, Martha. Your father and I love you very much and only want what’s best for you. You’re a wonderful young woman, and any man would be ridiculously lucky to marry you. Never, ever forget that.”

Martha sat, too shocked to respond. She was used to Edna Petunia laughing and flirting with Cletus, scolding and spoiling her grandchildren, or making spirited comments at town gatherings. Cletus and Edna Petunia didn’t believe in giving their girls too many compliments. They had raised them to be modest young women. But now, Edna Petunia was saying so many nice things about Martha—things that couldn’t possibly be true.

Edna Petunia caught Martha staring at her. “Now, don’t let it go to

your head!"

Martha laughed. That was more like the Edna Petunia she knew and loved.

"Now, I don't know what happened to you before I met you. But all I know is that you're just as good as that Myrtle Sibbles or whatever her name is," Edna Petunia declared.

"Mary Sibley," Martha said softly, feeling sad all over again. "I know Andrew's going to end up with her."

Edna Petunia stood up abruptly. "Don't be so sure of that." She exited the cabin, and Martha went to the door and watched as she mounted her horse and rode off into the distance. Martha shook her head in disbelief. Edna Petunia was acting strangely, even for Edna Petunia.

Martha walked over to the small basin in her cabin and washed her face. She took a deep breath. No matter what her personal feelings were, there was work to be done. She would get through this challenge just as she had with difficult situations in the past. She set off for the main house to complete a few tasks before preparing lunch. It was a beautiful day, and she was determined to make the most of it.

## Chapter 8

Andrew Ford fidgeted with his tie. He felt silly going through such formalities, but he knew it was necessary to demonstrate that he had serious intentions to court Mary Sibley.

Before he took off for the Sibley property, he went to the stable to tell Tom where he was going. When he walked into the barn, Tom whistled sharply.

“Well, don’t you clean up nicely!” Tom grinned.

Andrew shook his head. He had known this was a bad idea. “I just came to tell you I’m leaving now, but I’ll be back later tonight, in case you need anything.” Though Andrew usually only worked during daylight hours, Tom had grown to trust him over the past few months. Occasionally, Tom would show up at Andrew’s cabin and ask him to lend a hand toward a special project. Tom loved to shower Penny with gifts and other surprises, and he was equally devoted to his children. Andrew wanted Tom to know where he’d be in case he came looking for him.

“Thank you, Andrew. I appreciate it. And I wish you the best,” Tom said, adopting a more serious tone. He shook Andrew’s hand.

“Thank you,” Andrew replied. He walked out of the stables and found Lucky, his favorite horse. Once he was astride Lucky, they set off for the Sibley house. Because the Sibleys lived on the opposite side of Nowhere, Andrew had quite a ride ahead of him.

As they moved along at a brisk pace, Andrew noticed an elderly woman screaming and waving her arms. He slowed Lucky and stopped a few yards away from the woman. “Excuse me, can I help you?”

Up close, Andrew realized the woman was Edna Petunia Sanders, Martha’s mother. “Are you all right?”

Edna Petunia shouted. “No, I’m not! My husband is ill. You must come with me, quick!”

Andrew noticed that Edna Petunia also had a horse with her. Edna Petunia jumped onto the horse—Andrew was impressed at how spry she was—and took off at a furious pace. Andrew raced after her.

Andrew assumed she was headed for the Sanders’ home, which he had heard of but had never visited. Tom had told him that Edna



Petunia, Cletus, and their unmarried daughters lived in a spacious, lovely house on the outskirts of Nowhere. As they pulled up in front of the house, Andrew saw that Tom had been right.

Edna Petunia hopped off her horse and tied him to a post, then gestured for Andrew to do the same.

“Where is your husband, ma’am?” Andrew asked.

“In the house,” Edna Petunia replied, shuffling toward the front door. Andrew began to sprint. He knocked loudly on the door, hoping someone was inside to open it. As he waited, he had second thoughts about his choice to follow Edna Petunia. He wasn’t a doctor and wouldn’t be able to treat Cletus if he had any injuries. Instead of riding here without asking for any details, he should have set off to find the town doctor.

To his surprise, a young woman—one of the Sanders sisters, but he couldn’t remember which one—threw the door open and greeted him with a smile. “Oh, hi, Andrew! Welcome!”

Andrew looked back at Edna Petunia in confusion. “Where’s Cletus?”

“I’m in here!” a deep, booming voice called from inside the house.

Edna Petunia entered the house and motioned for Andrew to follow. Andrew walked cautiously into the house, expecting to find Cletus sprawled out on the floor and in pain. Edna Petunia led him into a parlor, where two other girls were reading on a sofa. In an armchair across from them sat Cletus Sanders, leisurely flipping through the pages of a thick book.

Andrew stared at Edna Petunia. “Pardon me, ma’am, but you said your husband was ill. He doesn’t seem very ill to me.”

Edna Petunia looked sheepish. She went to her husband and placed her hand on his forehead. “Oh, would you look at that? It seems Cletus has made a full recovery. What are the chances?”

Cletus set down his book. “Andrew Ford, good to see you. Didn’t think I’d run into you here! Will you join us for dinner?”

Andrew’s mind was still spinning. “What’s going on here?”

One of the girls on the sofa giggled.

“I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Andrew, I hope you didn’t have anywhere to be this evening,” Edna Petunia said. “I really thought Cletus needed help. But now that you’re here, why don’t you join us for dinner?”

Andrew realized that there was no way he’d be able to get to the Sibley house at the time Gerald and Veronica were expecting him. Even if he left now, he’d be late. Gerald would be furious. “I don’t think I can stay.”

“I won’t allow it!” Cletus protested. “Please, son, stay. It will be nice to have another man’s presence in the house. As you can tell, I’m

outnumbered here. At least the ratio is a little better than it was when all fifteen girls lived with us.”

Andrew chuckled. “I can imagine, sir.”

“So you’ll stay?” one of the Sanders daughters asked.

Andrew sighed. He had been unsure about Mary Sibley from the start. Maybe running into Edna Petunia had been a sign. He would explain to Gerald Sibley later what had happened and hope the man would forgive him. He shrugged. “Why not?”

The girl jumped up from the couch. “I’ll set the table!”

A few minutes later, Edna Petunia, Cletus, their daughters, and Andrew sat at the table. Edna Petunia set down a basket of fried chicken

“We’re so glad to see you outside of church. It’s nice to meet all the newcomers to Nowhere, since we used to be newcomers ourselves,” one of the daughters said brightly.

“Which of you is which again?” Andrew asked, embarrassed.

“I’m Katie,” the cheerful girl replied. “This is Hattie and this is Theresa. You can tell us apart by remembering that I love to sing, that Hattie is very sweet, and that Theresa loves to read.”

Andrew laughed. “I’ll do my best to remember that.”

“Speaking of telling us apart, we hear that you’ve gotten to know at least one of our sisters very well,” Theresa spoke up.

“Hm?” Cletus asked.

Andrew blushed. “I have been trying to get to know Martha better. It’s not easy.”

“She’s probably the least talkative of any of us,” Hattie remarked.

“Don’t get discouraged,” Edna Petunia instructed. “Be persistent.”

Andrew felt strange talking to Martha’s family about her without her there, but it seemed like they understood what he was going through. “I was pretty clear with Martha on what I wanted. I don’t think she’s interested in me,” Andrew confided.

Edna Petunia shook her head vigorously. “That’s not true, Andrew! Trust me. A mother knows.” She winked at him.

Andrew looked down at the floor. Edna Petunia seemed like she loved her daughters more than anything in the world, but she sure acted strangely sometimes. “Edna Petunia, I appreciate your advice. I hope you’re right.”



LATER THAT EVENING, Andrew woke up to a sharp rapping on his cabin door. He blearily stumbled out of bed and opened it, assuming there was some type of emergency. “What’s wrong?”

To his surprise, Martha stood on his doorstep, looking frightened.

“Are you okay?” Andrew asked.

Martha shivered even though it wasn’t cold outside. “May I speak with you?”

“It’s the middle of the night,” Andrew pointed out.

“I’ll leave. We can talk another time,” Martha said hurriedly. She spun around, but Andrew caught her shoulder and turned her around again to face him.

“Wait just a minute. If whatever you want to talk about was important enough to wake me from my sleep, it’s important enough for us to talk about now,” Andrew reasoned. “Give me one moment.”

He went back into his cabin and pulled on a dressing robe. He had answered the door in only his night clothes and felt exposed if they were going to speak outside. He pulled on the robe and joined Martha outside. “That’s better. What is it?”

“I have to tell you something I’ve never told anyone before,” Martha began. She fidgeted. “I’m nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?” Andrew slid his hands into Martha’s, hoping he could provide some strength to help her tell her story.

Martha looked up at him. “I’m afraid once I tell you, you won’t like me anymore. You’ll think I’m damaged.”

“Martha, there’s nothing you could do or say to make me not care for you anymore. You can tell me anything,” Andrew said tenderly. He thought for a moment. “Would you feel better if we could make ourselves comfortable?”

Martha blushed. “I don’t think that would be appropriate.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Andrew chastised himself for his choice of words. “That’s not what I meant. I thought we could sit at one of the benches near the stable. There’s a light out there, so it won’t be too dark.”

“Oh, that would be nice,” Martha said, relief washing over her face.

Andrew led Martha through the property to the benches outside of the barn. They both sat down, and he took her hand in his again, squeezing it so she’d know that he was there for her. “Take your time. I’m just glad that you’re going to tell me about yourself. That’s all I’ve been wanting from you.”

Martha nodded. She paused for a few moments, then began her story. “I was born to a mother who was younger than I am now. She was an artist and sold crafts in a small roadside stand near her village. One day, she met a man who was older than her. He bought art from her and her friends, and sometimes he would pass by in his wagon and visit with her. Soon, she found she was expecting a baby. He abandoned her because he didn’t want anyone to know that he had taken up with a much younger woman.” Martha took a deep breath.

Andrew nodded in understanding.

"After I was born, my mother struggled to find a place we could live. She was young and unmarried. She had to take care of me, so she couldn't sell the crafts she was used to selling for money. She found another man in her village to live with. But . . . this man was bad." Martha wiped a tear from her face.

"Thank you for telling me this," Andrew whispered, squeezing her hand again.

"I don't remember very much, but what I remember is that he would often come into our house drunk, and if she did something he didn't like or made a noise that was too loud, he would hit her. And sometimes . . . sometimes, he would hit me, too," Martha confessed.

Andrew felt a wave of anger rise up inside of him. He wanted to find this man who had hurt Martha and her mother and bring him to justice. He hated to think of anyone hurting her.

"Eventually, my mother realized that the safest place for me was not with him. She took me to the orphanage. I only know this story because one of the matrons who looked after us, Cassie Hayes, told me everything that my mother told her on the day she dropped me off," Martha explained. "There's a lot about my life from that time that I don't even remember. I've blocked a lot of the memories because they were too painful."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Martha. That's awful," Andrew replied.

"Thank you for understanding," Martha said. "I've been afraid to tell anyone about my past. I'm worried that when people find out where I come from, they'll think that I'm like that, too."

"Please don't think that, Martha!" Andrew said quickly. "To me, it sounds like you grew up in a very difficult situation. In a way, it sounds like the orphanage was the best place for you."

Martha nodded. "I can never repay Edna Petunia and Cletus for what they've done for me. I never expected I would end up in another home, and I never knew I'd be in one that was as safe and nice as the Sanders' house."

"It is a very nice house," Andrew admitted.

"Have you been there?" Martha asked, confused.

"It's a long story," Andrew said.

"I've got time. I just told you a long story," Martha pointed out.

Andrew laughed. "Maybe another time. For tonight, I want to make sure you are all right."

Martha looked up at him. "I'm all right."

Andrew squeezed her hand. "Good. Since you were so open with me, I want to be honest with you. Gerald Sibley has been after me for weeks to try to get me to propose marriage to his daughter, Mary."

Martha sighed. "I know."

"You do?" Andrew asked.

"Nowhere is a small town. Word travels fast," Martha explained.

"So it does," Andrew mused.

They were silent for a moment. Finally, Martha asked a question that had been on her mind. "What do you intend to do about Mary Sibley?"

Andrew sighed. "I don't have any feelings for her. I don't even know her! I was just trying not to offend Mr. Sibley."

"So you don't plan on courting her?" Martha asked.

"No. I only want to court you, Martha." Andrew smiled at her.

Relief flooded through Martha as she realized that Andrew didn't want to be with Mary Sibley.

"Well, what do you say?" Andrew stared at Martha expectantly.

Martha was lost. "What do I say to what?"

"Can I court you?" Andrew asked.

Martha thought about this for a long time before speaking. She still felt vulnerable and exposed after sharing such a personal story with Andrew. She wanted to go on a date with him and learn more about his background and values, but part of her was scared. Did she really deserve to be with someone as kind and loving as Andrew? Martha took a deep breath. "I think I'd like that. If we can take things slowly."

Andrew nodded eagerly. "Of course, Martha. We can take things at exactly the pace you're comfortable with." Andrew lifted his arm and wrapped it around Martha's shoulders.

Martha stiffened at first, then relaxed in Andrew's embrace once she realized that it felt comfortable and easy. She settled into him, pressing into his chest, and inhaled, enjoying his strong, earthy scent.

"Just so you know," Andrew went on, "my offer still stands. When you're ready, I'd like to marry you."

A thrill coursed through Martha's body. She couldn't believe that strong, strapping Andrew Ford wanted to marry her. Part of her still felt scared, but with Edna Petunia's pep talk and Andrew's support, she felt like she could face her fears. Still, she didn't want to rush into anything. "Thank you. It's a big decision, and I need to think it over."

"I understand that. And in the meantime, I hope I can court you properly," Andrew said.

"I think I'd like that," Martha said. "But is it all right if we keep things between ourselves for a bit? It's still hard for me to share my feelings, and I think if everyone knew about our relationship, it would be overwhelming."

Andrew nodded. "Of course, Martha. Whatever you prefer."

Martha tried to smile, but she was still lost in her thoughts about her childhood.

"What's wrong?" Andrew asked.

“I’m just thinking about all of the bad memories I have from my past and all the things I’ve forgotten because they were so terrible. It scares me,” Martha admitted.

Andrew turned and pressed his forehead to Martha’s. “Together, we can make new memories, Martha.”

Martha’s eyes welled up with tears again, but this time, they were tears of joy.

## Chapter 9

*M*artha wiped a rag over the staircase banister in the main

house, her thoughts occupied by Andrew Ford. Ever since the evening where she had opened up to him, he had been the only thing she could think of.

They hadn't been able to go on a date yet due to their work assignments, but Martha knew they would go as soon as they were able.

"Martha!" Penny's sharp voice snapped Martha to attention. "Why do you keep polishing that same spot over and over again?"

Martha smiled sheepishly. "I suppose I'm a little distracted."

"A *little* distracted?" Penny laughed. "Even Robby noticed. He said you stopped reading to him in the middle of a book. Twice!"

Martha blushed. She wanted to tell Penny what was going on with her, but she wasn't sure if Andrew had told Tom yet. She decided to ask Andrew about it the next time she saw him. As she thought of him, a dreamy expression spread across her face.

"All right, Martha Sanders, that's it. You need to tell me what's going on with you!" Penny demanded.

"It's nothing!" Martha yelled. "I almost forgot, I left some laundry hanging on the clothesline outside, and it's about to rain! I must go." She put the rag away with the other cleaning supplies and raced out of the house toward the clothesline.

Penny shook her head. She knew something was going on with her sister, and she would find out what it was. Penny knew everything about every man, woman, and child who lived on the McClain Ranch. It was only a matter of time before she figured out what was going on with Martha.

Outside, Martha rushed toward the clothesline. There were a few of Penny's blouses and her nephews' pants hanging on the line. She took them down and folded each one neatly, then carried the stack of clothes back into the house.

She put the clothes away and decided to check on Robby. His leg was healing nicely, but he was still staying in the cabin. She walked out to the cabin and opened the door.

To her surprise, Andrew was reading to him even though it was the middle of the day.

“What are you doing here?” Martha asked.

“I decided to come here instead of taking a late lunch,” Andrew explained. “After all, Robby was waiting to see how the book ended!” He held up the children’s storybook he was reading from.

“Keep going, Mr. Andrew!” Robby urged. “Hi, Aunt Martha. You can stay, too, as long as you’re quiet!”

Martha chuckled, and Robby hushed her. Martha took a seat on the cot and listened as Andrew continued to read.

When he had finished, Andrew closed the book and patted Robby on the head. “That’s all for now. I have to get back to work. Get some rest, Robby.”

“What about one more?” Robby grinned mischievously at Martha.

Martha looked at Andrew. “How many stories did you read to him?”

“Three,” Andrew confessed.

“I think three is plenty for the middle of the day!” Martha pronounced. “You stayed up very late last night because you convinced me to read you a few stories before bedtime, so you must need some sleep. Why don’t you take a nap?”

Robby protested, but she could tell he was growing tired from the way his eyes kept fluttering shut. She helped fluff the pillows and pulled the covers up around his chest and shoulders. She kissed Robby on the forehead. “Rest now, little one.”

Once she saw that he was breathing evenly, his eyes fully shut, she motioned to Andrew to leave the cabin. She held the door open and shut it as softly as possible.

“Thank you for spending time with him,” Martha said. “It shows me that you’ll make a wonderful father one day.”

Andrew grabbed Martha’s hands. “I’m so glad to hear you say that. That’s all I want. I hope I won’t have to wait too long before that day comes.” He looked at Martha expectantly.

Martha’s face fell.

“What’s wrong?” Andrew asked. “What have I said to upset you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not used to this—to having someone else depend on me for a decision. I think I still need a little more time,” Martha confessed.

“Of course, Martha. I didn’t mean to pressure you in any way.” Andrew leaned down and whispered into Martha’s ear. “I hope you don’t blame me for being anxious to marry you.”

Martha felt her cheeks flush bright red. Andrew made her body feel things she’d never known were possible. She felt too excited and anxious to speak.



Andrew pulled back and continued speaking in his low, deep voice. "I'll wait for you as long as it takes, Martha. But I pray to God it won't be too long. A man has certain needs and urges."

Martha nodded. She knew from her married sisters exactly what would happen if she and Andrew were married. Before she'd met him, she had always been afraid of the activities they'd described. Even though her sisters seemed to enjoy them thoroughly, she had always thought something might be wrong with her because she didn't have any desire to do *that*. Now, however, that she had met Andrew Ford, she found herself curious about exploring those types of wifely activities. Her face felt even hotter as she imagined Andrew's strong body against her own.

"What are you thinking about?" Andrew asked with a wicked expression. It was almost as if he had known exactly what was on her mind.

"Nothing!" Martha lied. She looked at the ground, feeling mortified. Then she remembered that if she and Andrew were to become husband and wife, they needed to be honest and open with each other. She took a deep breath. "Actually . . . I was thinking about you. And what might happen if we did marry."

A huge grin spread across Andrew's face. "I'm so happy to hear that, Martha. I'm going to be late getting back to work, so I should go now. But I'm so happy I got to see you."

Andrew bent down and pressed his lips against Martha's before she could stop him. When he was done, he twirled around and rushed off toward the stables, leaving Martha reeling. She leaned against the wall of Robby's cabin, trying to catch her breath. She always felt dreamy and strange after seeing Andrew, and today was no different. She wondered if the bubbly feeling in her stomach would ever go away. It made it hard to concentrate on anything else.

Still tasting Andrew's lips on her own, Martha walked back to the house to start preparing dinner. She knew Penny would want to get started right away, since it was already late in the afternoon.

As she walked toward the main house, she noticed a loud commotion coming from the front door. Martha approached the house, feeling uneasy.

When she got closer, she saw that Gerald Sibley was pacing back and forth on the front porch. Penny was patiently talking to him, but Martha couldn't hear what she was saying. She rushed up to see if Penny needed any help.

"Where is he? You have to tell me where he is!" Gerald Sibley shouted.

"I don't know," Penny said with forced politeness.

Just then, Tom rode up on horseback. He calmly dismounted, tied

the horse to a post, and walked up to the porch. Gerald Sibley stopped in his tracks. "What's going on here?" Tom asked, putting an arm protectively around Penny.

"I need to speak to one of your men. Andrew Ford," Gerald said.

"He's at work," Tom said. "You can talk to me instead."

"But—that's not—I need to speak to him. It's urgent!" Gerald sputtered.

"I have it on confidence from Andrew that he sent you a letter, Gerald. I think he's said everything he needs to say to you in that letter," Tom said, refusing to budge.

Gerald pulled a letter out of his pocket. He unfolded it. "He's not a man of his word! My wife and I made all the arrangements for him to marry our daughter, and he refuses!"

Tom sighed. "I don't appreciate that you're spreading lies about one of my most trusted associates without him here. Penny, Martha, will you go in the house? I'd like to speak to Gerald alone."

Martha followed Penny into the house. She wanted to hear what they were saying, but she couldn't.

"We should fix supper," Penny said. "That was odd, wasn't it?"

All Martha could do was nod.

Outside, Tom was getting frustrated. He was normally a patient, good-natured man, but something about Gerald Sibley's attitude was grating. "I think it's best if you leave now."

"I'm not leaving until I speak with Andrew Ford," Gerald said obstinately.

Tom sighed. "Follow me."

He led Gerald on foot to the stables, where Andrew was cleaning out the stalls. "Andrew, someone's here to see you and won't leave until you speak with him."

Andrew looked up in surprise. "Mr. Sibley?"

"I invited you to my home for dinner! Not only did you not show up, but then you sent me a letter informing me that you have *no* intentions to pursue my daughter's hand?" Gerald shouted angrily.

"Should I round up the other men and ask him to leave?" Tom asked Andrew.

Andrew put a hand up. "No, I'll speak with him. But this is between Mr. Sibley and me. Would you excuse us?"

"Happily," Tom replied. He walked back toward the main house to retrieve his horse.

Inside the barn, Andrew stopped shoveling. "Mr. Sibley, I meant what I said in the letter. I understand that you wanted me to court your daughter, but that's not what I want."

"I don't understand why you wouldn't want to marry my daughter! She's beautiful, intelligent, and has lots of friends. She'd make an

excellent wife. Why wouldn't you want that?" Gerald asked. His voice was wavering.

Andrew realized that Gerald wasn't actually angry. He was hurt and disappointed. "Gerald, I'm sorry if I wasn't forthright with you. I can see that any man would be lucky to have your daughter as a wife. However, I have my eyes on another young woman. It wouldn't be fair to her or to your daughter if I tried to pursue Mary."

Gerald's jaw dropped. "But who? There aren't very many women who aren't already married!"

"I can't tell you that yet. But if everything works out, you'll find out in a few months' time," Andrew said. "For now, I need to respect her wishes."

Gerald let out a long sigh. "I understand. I didn't know. But why couldn't you have just told me that in the first place? I made a fool of myself in front of my family waiting for you."

"You're right. I should have been more forthright and direct. In my defense, sometimes it's hard to get a word in edgewise when talking with you," Andrew said.

Gerald chuckled. "I can't argue with that."

"Please accept my apology for not being more honest with you from the start," Andrew continued. "And the night I was supposed to come over to your home for dinner . . . let's just say, certain circumstances arose to prevent me from getting to your house. It wasn't for a lack of trying. As soon as I got home that evening, I sent my letter."

Gerald nodded. "I appreciate you being candid with me now. I still think you're a fine man. I can't say I'm not upset that you won't be my son-in-law. But I hope you'll be very happy with whoever this young woman is that you have your heart set on."

"Thank you, sir." Andrew stuck his hand out, and Gerald took it. They shook solemnly.

"I suppose I should be going now," Gerald said.

"I'll see you out." Andrew walked Gerald to the entrance to the barn. From there, Gerald could see the wagon he'd driven from his home. "I'll see you at church next time we go to Nowhere for services."

"Yes, Andrew. Take care," Gerald said in a small voice.

Andrew watched Gerald walk away. He was glad that he had been able to tell the truth and that Gerald had understood. He hoped Mary Sibley would fall in love with a young man who was a perfect match for her—just the way he hoped that he was a perfect match for Martha.

Tom trotted up on his horse. "How was that?"

"Fine, Tom. Just taking care of a few loose ends," Andrew

explained.

Tom smirked. "I know you won't tell me, but does this have anything to do with Martha Sanders? I've seen the way you two look at each other."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Andrew said with a confident grin.

Tom shook his head and nudged the horse, taking off toward the main house. He knew it was only a matter of time before his hired hand and his sister-in-law announced their courtship.



MARTHA STARED out the window as she peeled potatoes.

"Martha!" Penny cried.

Martha blinked. "What?"

"You've been peeling the same potato for five minutes," Penny complained. "What is going on with you?"

"Nothing," Martha said quickly, then realized that she had nothing to hide from Penny.

Penny waited patiently.

"It's Andrew," Martha confessed.

"I knew it!" Penny said happily. "Tell me everything!"

Martha sighed. "He's asked me to marry him."

Penny shrieked. "He proposed? I can't believe it!"

Martha nodded, blushing.

"Oh, my. We'll have to find you a dress, and the catering, and the cake, and flowers—" Penny began to pace, completely forgetting about the pan of pork chops in front of her.

"Penny! The chops!" Martha pointed out.

"Oh, right!" Penny flipped the pork chops over with a pair of tongs. She pressed the tongs into the pork chops until they sizzled. "Almost done."

"Plus," Martha added, "I don't even know if I want to marry him yet."

Penny turned to stare at Martha. "Why would you not want to marry Andrew? When he first arrived, you blushed like a schoolgirl around him!"

"There's a lot you don't know about me," Martha admitted. "One day, I hope I can tell you more about it. It's painful for me to talk about, but it makes it hard for me to get close to others. I'm worried that . . . if Andrew and I did marry, I'd be a terrible wife and mother."

Penny's expression changed to one of sympathy. "Oh, Martha. I can see that you're very troubled over this. But you have nothing to worry about. I *know* you'll be a wonderful wife and mother."

Martha frowned. "How do you know?"

Penny smiled. "I see the way you take care of Robby. You're so good with him. You're kind and patient, but you also set limits and make sure he follows the rules and isn't spoiled. You take time to explain things to him to make sure he understands and can make good choices."

"But I'm the one who was watching him when he got hurt," Martha pointed out.

Penny put a hand up. "No, Martha, you are *not* allowed to blame yourself for that! If I had a list of how many times my boys have hurt themselves on this ranch, I could fill a book."

"No," Martha gasped. "That can't be true."

"Unfortunately, there are no schoolbooks that can teach you how to be a mother. No one can prepare you for it. But you'll figure it out. One thing you'll learn is that children—boys especially, it seems—love to climb and explore and have adventures. That means there will be accidents and injuries. All we can do is be there for them and pick them up when they fall down, take care of them when they fall ill. Does that make sense?" Penny concluded.

Martha nodded slowly. "I think it does."

Just then, Tom came into the house. "Mm, what's for dinner? It smells delicious! And a little . . . burnt?"

"Oh, dear!" Penny took the pork chops out of the pan. "I'll eat the burnt one."

Tom came into the kitchen and kissed Penny on the lips. "I can eat the burnt one. You and Martha have been cooking and cleaning all day. It's no problem."

"I should eat the burnt chop," Martha said. "I'm the one who distracted Penny from the stovetop!"

Tom turned his eyes toward Martha. "Hm, that's quite interesting. Care to tell me what you two ladies were talking about?"

Martha blushed and clamped her mouth shut. "Not right now."

"Martha told me in confidence," Penny said playfully. "I suppose you'll have to wait and find out when everyone else does."

## Chapter 10

That evening as she lay on her cot in Robby's cabin, Martha couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about the conversation she'd had with Penny. Maybe Penny was right. What was she waiting for? She cared for Andrew and knew that he cared for her.

Plus, she knew her work had suffered because she had been so distracted lately. If she and Andrew could finally be together, maybe she wouldn't have to daydream so often.

Martha also remembered Edna Petunia's words. Knowing that her mother believed in her made her feel like she could do anything.

Martha slipped out of the cabin and knocked quietly on Andrew's door. A few moments later, he answered it, his eyes bleary with sleep.

"Martha!" Andrew exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Martha suddenly felt shy. She spun around. "It can wait until morning!"

"Wait a minute!" Andrew stepped out of his cabin and grabbed Martha's hand, turning her around to face him again. "You can tell me anything. What is it?"

Martha took a deep breath. "I've been thinking about what you said."

Andrew felt hope swelling inside of him. "And?"

"And I want to be your wife." Martha knew as she said the words that she had never been more sure of anything.

Andrew picked Martha up and twirled her around. He let out a whoop.

"Sh!" Martha hissed. "You'll wake the others!"

"This is a happy occasion," Andrew exclaimed. "We need to celebrate!"

"But it's the middle of the night," Martha pointed out.

"I can think of a few ideas," Andrew said and bent down to press his lips against hers. They kissed under the moonlight for a long time, and when they finally parted, Martha gasped to catch her breath.

"That was . . . really nice," Martha remarked once she could speak again.

"Just wait until we're married, Martha. There are so many things I

have in mind,” Andrew said with a wink.

Martha swatted him. “You’ll have to be patient until then.”

Andrew sighed. “I know. I hope we can marry quickly. How’s tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” Martha couldn’t believe her ears. “I assume you’re joking.”

“Actually . . .” Andrew looked sheepish. “I wasn’t joking. But if that’s too soon for you, I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

Martha smiled. “I’m flattered. But I’ve always thought that Cletus would give me away and Edna Petunia and my sisters would help me fix my hair and sew a dress for me. That could take some time.”

“Of course, Martha. I want you to have the wedding you’ve always dreamed of,” Andrew told her.

Martha felt her heart soar. She had never expected that Andrew would be so kind and understanding. Hearing him explain that he would wait for her as long as she needed gave her another idea. “On second thought, maybe your first idea was a good one. Let’s get married tomorrow.”

“What?” Andrew thought he was imagining things. “But you just said . . .”

“I know, but talking to you about it has made me realize that a wedding isn’t about what dress I wear or what the flowers look like. It’s about you and me starting the rest of our lives together as man and wife,” Martha explained. “And I don’t want to wait a minute longer than I have to!”

“Trust me, Martha, I don’t either!” Andrew picked her up again and twirled her around, then pulled her in for a long, dizzying kiss.

Martha took a few deep breaths to steady herself. “I want to be married to you right now!”

“Too bad we don’t have a minister here on the ranch. We have a cook, ranchers, horses, but no minister,” Andrew joked.

“You’ve given me a great idea!” Martha cried.

“What is it?” Andrew asked. He wasn’t sure if it was the moonlight or the kiss they’d just shared, but his bride-to-be seemed positively giddy. He loved seeing her like this, so happy and carefree.

“Normally, we’d have to wait at least a day or two to find a minister to marry us. But I have a brother-in-law who happens to be a minister!” Martha explained.

“You do?” Andrew scratched his head. He thought he had been introduced to all of the sisters and their spouses, but now he wasn’t sure.

“Yes,” Martha giggled. “Micah Barton, the minister for the church in Nowhere. I just know if we ask him, he’ll perform the wedding ceremony for us.”

“Oh, yes! I remember meeting him and his wife, Sarah Jane. I don’t think I put two and two together that she is your sister and he is your brother-in-law. That’s a great idea. Do you want to marry in that church as well?” Andrew asked.

“That would be convenient, since we’ll already be there,” Martha said. “Sarah Jane can be our witness. But . . .” She looked up at Andrew.

“What is it, Martha?” Andrew asked, grabbing her hand.

“This is going to sound silly, but I would love to get married here, in Robby’s cabin. I know that probably sounds strange, but in a way, I feel he’s the one who brought us together. What do you think about that?”

Andrew kissed Martha again. He loved how sweet and thoughtful she was. “Martha, I’d marry you anywhere at all. I think getting married in the cabin so Robby can be there would be fantastic. I can ride a horse to Nowhere at dawn and ask Micah to come back here with me.”

Martha nodded excitedly. “In the meantime, I’ll talk to Penny and see if she has anything that I could wear. Oh, I’m so excited I can hardly stand it.”

Andrew grinned. “I know exactly what you mean. There’s no way I’ll get a lick of sleep tonight. And if I have my way, neither of us will get a lick of sleep tomorrow.”

Martha blushed and swatted at Andrew. “Do I need to remind you that we’re not married yet?”

“Trust me. I’m aware of that fact,” Andrew said sadly. “Fortunately, in less than a day’s time, we will be.” He pressed his lips to hers again. “Now, it’s nearly midnight. It’s bad luck for us to see each other before the wedding. I’ll leave at first light to get Micah. Should we plan to meet around noon in Robby’s cabin?”

Martha worked it out in her head. “Yes, that should give me enough time.”

Andrew kissed her one more time. “Goodbye, my love. The next time I see you, you’ll be walking down the aisle! Or at least through the entryway to the cabin.”

Martha laughed. “Perfect. I’ll see you then.” She rushed back to Robby’s cabin, where she tried to get some rest. She tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable. She was excited but also a little nervous. Andrew clearly had many plans for what they would do once they were man and wife. She was excited to engage in marital activities, but she was also scared. What if she didn’t know what to do? What if Andrew wasn’t happy with her?

Martha tried to tell herself that everything would work out for the best. The most important thing was that she and Andrew had been



honest with each other and both wanted to get married. She fell asleep dreaming about saying “I do” with a simple bouquet of bluebonnets in her hand.

When she awoke, the day’s first light was streaming in through the window. Robby was still fast asleep. She dressed in a hurry and ran to the main house. She found Penny in the kitchen, boiling water for coffee.

“Penny! I need your help!” Martha panted.

“What is it? Is everything all right?” Penny asked, concerned.

“Everything’s more than all right. Everything’s wonderful!” Martha gushed. “Andrew asked me to marry him, and I accepted. We are getting married at noon.”

“Whoa. Slow down a minute! What’s happening?” Penny tightened her robe around her body. She could hardly keep up with Martha’s announcements. “Where are you getting married?”

“Actually,” Martha said sheepishly, “we were thinking we’d get married here. In Robby’s cabin.”

“Robby’s cabin?” Penny stared at Martha as if she’d lost her mind. “What on earth’s so special about Robby’s cabin?”

Martha fidgeted. “I know we should get married in a church, and I’d love that, but I really want Robby to be there. After all, he helped bring us together. If Andrew hadn’t been so considerate after Robby’s accident, we never would have gotten closer.”

“I see,” Penny said, but her head was still spinning. “Who’s going to perform the service?”

“Micah,” Martha replied.

“How does Micah know you’re getting married?” Penny scratched her head, trying to think. The coffee couldn’t be ready soon enough.

“Andrew’s on his way there now to ask him to marry us. I think he’ll agree,” Martha explained. “Now, what shall we make for breakfast?”



A FEW HOURS LATER, a small group had assembled in Robby’s cabin to witness Andrew and Martha’s wedding ceremony. Penny had lent Martha a simple white dress, and a few of the orphans had presented the bride with a lovely bouquet of bluebonnets, which she held in one hand as she and Andrew stared at one another lovingly.

Robby watched eagerly from his bed as Micah explained each step of the custom. As Micah began to talk about the marriage vows Andrew and Martha were about to exchange, everyone heard a loud ruckus from outside the cabin. Penny rushed to the window and looked out.

“Stop the wedding!” a muffled voice screamed.

“What are you doing here?” Penny cried in disbelief.

Martha’s heart raced. Who was trying to interrupt her wedding?

Suddenly, Edna Petunia burst into the cabin. “Stop the wedding! Stop the wedding! I need to be seated!”

“What are you doing here?” Martha repeated Penny’s question. She was stunned that Edna Petunia had found out about the wedding ceremony.

Tom pulled out the cot Martha usually slept on and helped Edna Petunia take a seat. Edna Petunia panted for breath. Everyone in the cabin stared at her.

“Don’t look at me! I’m not the one getting married!” Edna Petunia said indignantly.

“Edna Petunia, how did you know to come here?” Andrew asked, bewildered. Micah had followed him directly to the ranch, and they’d spent the morning discussing the service. Micah hadn’t had time to alert anyone about the wedding.

Edna Petunia took out her flask, unscrewed the lid, and took a long, slow sip. “Ah, very good . . .” she breathed in relief, “. . . cough syrup!” Edna Petunia hastily added when she realized everyone was still staring at her. “Really, you don’t all have to keep looking at me! Sarah Jane overheard Andrew and Micah’s conversation. She knew I’d be heartbroken if I missed one of my bastards’ weddings.”

“But how did you get here so quickly?” Martha didn’t understand.

“Sarah Jane took a horse to get me first thing in the morning, and then Cletus dropped me off. He’s parking the wagon as we speak,” Edna Petunia explained nonchalantly.

Sure enough, Cletus poked his head through the cabin door next. “What’s this I hear about a wedding?”

“Grandpa!” Robby cried, thrilled. It was the most people he’d seen since the day of his accident, and he was having the time of his life.

Micah looked around the room nervously. “May I proceed? Or are there, um, any other guests who will be joining us?”

Again, everyone looked at Edna Petunia. She shrugged. “I don’t know!” After a long pause, she added, “But I don’t think so.”

Micah cleared his throat. “Andrew and Martha will now exchange wedding vows.”

As Andrew and Martha recited their vows to one another, Martha reflected on how lucky she was to have found the man of her dreams, and to be getting married in front of so many people she loved. Although she wished all of her sisters could have been there, she was also happy for the small crowd because she felt much more comfortable in a smaller group.

Before Martha realized it, the ceremony was practically over.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” Micah declared.

Andrew leaned in for a long, deep kiss. Martha’s lips curved into a smile as she kissed him back. She heard Tom and Robby whooping in the background. She had never been so happy in her entire life.

Once the wedding was over, Cletus and Edna Petunia surrounded Martha and hugged her fiercely. “We knew this day would come,” Edna Petunia said, fighting off tears.

“We’re very proud of you, dear,” Cletus said.

“Thank you,” Martha whispered, feeling tears of her own welling up in her eyes. She couldn’t believe how lucky she was that her fate had brought her here to Nowhere and the loving embrace of the Sanders family.

Now, she and Andrew would start their own—family. The future was truly limitless.

## Epilogue

*M*artha finished setting the table in the small cabin she now

shared with Andrew. She couldn't wait until her husband arrived home. Now that Robby was back in his old bedroom, she and Penny had gone back to their regular cooking and cleaning assignments. Instead of sleeping in Robby's cabin each night, she slept in the cabin she shared with Andrew.

She heard the door creak, and soon Andrew was inside, covering her in kisses and hugs. Even though the wedding had been two months before, Andrew still couldn't keep his hands off her. Martha didn't mind the attention. She was learning a lot about how to be a good wife to Andrew, and she was enjoying it.

"Hello, husband" Martha greeted her husband once he had paused for a breath.

"Hello, wife!" Andrew said, one of their standard exchanges.

"How was your day?" Martha asked. She uncovered the pan she'd brought over from the main house. Martha still helped Penny with dinner for the main house, then took a small portion of the meal back to the cabin, where she shared it with Andrew. Now that he was married, he took his meals with her instead of at the bunkhouse. Both were very happy with this arrangement.

"It was fine. Tiring, but good work. How about you?" Andrew asked. "Is there any news yet?" Andrew knew that Martha had seen Dr. Harvey that morning. He was hoping that Martha would tell him she was pregnant.

Martha looked down at the floor. "No. I'm not expecting."

"Oh. That's too bad. But hopefully soon," Andrew replied.

"Yes," Martha said, still looking down at the ground.

"Martha, is something wrong?" Andrew asked. "Have I made you unhappy?"

"Oh no, not at all!" Martha exclaimed.

"Something seems to be troubling you, though," Andrew remarked.

Martha scooped some of the pot roast from the pan onto Andrew's plate, then a little onto her own. As Andrew began to eat, Martha sighed. "You're right. I've been a little blue lately, because . . . I'm

nervous and scared.”

Andrew stopped eating and stared into his wife’s eyes. “Martha, what are you nervous and scared about?”

“I’m very happy with you and our life together. But I’m worried that when we have children, I’m going to make the same mistakes my mother did. I can’t do that to a child! Maybe I’m not cut out to be a mother,” Martha admitted.

“Come here,” Andrew said, motioning toward his lap. Martha walked around the table and sat down on his thigh. He wrapped his arms around her.

“Martha Ford, I chose you to be not only my wife, but the mother of my children. Do you know why I did that?” Andrew asked.

Martha shook her head.

“Because you, Martha, are the kindest, smartest, prettiest, most generous woman I’ve ever met. You’re going to make a fantastic mother. I know it in my bones,” Andrew said. He kissed her on the lips.

Martha relaxed. Andrew always made her feel wonderful, like she could do anything.

“Just remember,” Andrew added, “I’ll be here, too. We’ll both learn about being parents together. Don’t you want that for us?”

“Oh, yes,” Martha said. “I do want that for us.”

“Then it’s settled,” Andrew said with a smirk. “And on the topic of babies, I have some other thoughts . . .” Andrew began kissing Martha’s face and caressing her. Martha sighed with pleasure. Andrew was right. Being a mother was something she’d always dreamed of. She knew it would be difficult, but it would also be rewarding.

Martha grinned and kissed Andrew back. She couldn’t wait to start a family with the man of her dreams.

## About the Author

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